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ORBIT Science Fiction

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SCIENCE FICTION

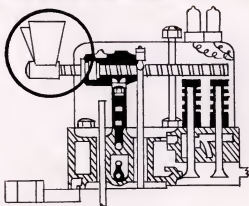
A NEW "TEX HARRIGAN"
ADVENTURE

by AUGUST DERLETH



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In this ISSUE!



THE POWER OF ONE MAN'S MIND

He was a "Unique"—a human born in secrecy, with powers far beyond those of ordinary mortals. And when the great test came, his mind alone, reaching across the limitless abyss of cosmic space, saved humanity from a terrible fate! See "THE BUTTERFLY KISS",

Page 104.

ORBIT

THE BEST IN

Science Fiction

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EVERY STORY ORIGINAL:

POTENTIAL ENEMY

by Mack Reynolds 4

EXPLOITER'S END

by James Causey 14

THE MATING OF THE MOONS

by Kenneth O'Hara 32

A TRAVELER IN TIME

by August Derleth 48

TONY AND THE BEETLES

by Philip K. Dick 60

PLACE OF MEETING

by Charles Beaumont 72

SCIENCE NOTES

As reported by Science Service 77

LUNA ESCAPADE

by H. B. Fyfe 80

TIME AND THE WOMAN

by G. Gordon Dewey 92

THE BUTTERFLY KISS

by Arthur Dekker Savage 104

MUSEUM PIECE

by John Christopher 122

POTENTIAL ENEMY

by Mack Reynolds

Alexander the Great had not dreamed of India, nor even Egypt, when he embarked upon his invasion of the Persian Empire. It was not a matter of being like the farmer: "I ain't selfish, all I want is the land that jines mine." It was simply that after regaining the Greek cities of Asia Minor from Darius, he could not stop. He could not afford to have powerful neighbors that might threaten his domains tomorrow. So he took Egypt, and the Eastern Satrapies, and then had to

**CAESAR HAD THE SAME PROBLEM
AND NEVER SOLVED IT. LORD HELP US
IF IT JUST CAN'T BE DONE!**



continue to India. There he learned of the power of Cathay, but an army mutiny forestalled him and he had to return to Babylon. He died there while making plans to attack Arabia, Carthage, Rome. You see, given the military outlook, he could not afford powerful neighbors on his borders; they might become enemies some day.

Alexander had not been the first to be faced with this problem, nor was he the last. So it was later with Rome, and later with Napoleon, and later still with Adolf the Ar-yan, and still later—

IT ISN'T TRAVEL that is broadening, stimulating, or educational. Not the traveling itself. Visiting new cities, new countries, new continents, or even new planets, *yes*. But the travel itself, *no*. Be it by the methods of the Twentieth Century—automobile, bus, train, or aircraft—or be it by spaceship, travel is nothing more than boring.

Oh, it's interesting enough for the first few hours, say. You look out the window of your car, bus, train, or airliner, or over the side of your ship, and it's very stimulating. But after that first period it becomes boring, monotonous, sameness to the point of redundancy.

And so it is in space.

Markham Gray, free lance journalist for more years than he would admit to, was en route from the Neptune satellite Triton to his

home planet, Earth, mistress of the Solar System. He was seasoned enough as a space traveler to steel himself against the monotony with cards and books, with chess problems and wire tapes, and even with an attempt to do an article on the distant earthbase from which he was returning for the *Spacetraveler Digest*.

When all these failed, he sometimes spent a half hour or so staring at the vision screen which took up a considerable area of one wall of the lounge.

Unless you had a vivid imagination of the type which had remained with Markham Gray down through the years, a few minutes at a time would have been enough. With rare exception, the view on the screen seemed almost like a still; a velvety blackness with pinpoints of brilliant light, unmoving, unchanging.

But even Markham Gray, with his ability to dream and to discern that which is beyond, found himself twisting with ennui after thirty minutes of staring at endless space. He wished that there was a larger number of passengers aboard. The half-dozen businessmen and their women and children had left him cold and he was doing his best to avoid them. Now, if there had only been one good chess player—

Co-pilot Bormann was passing through the lounge. He nodded to the distinguished elderly passenger,

flicked his eyes quickly, professionally, over the vision screen and was about to continue on his way.

Gray called idly, "Hans, I thought the space patrols very seldom got out here."

"Practically never, sir," the other told him politely, hesitating momentarily. Part of the job was to be constantly amiable, constantly watchful of the passengers out here in deep space—they came down with space cafard at the drop of a hat. Markham Gray reminded Bormann of pictures of Benjamin Franklin he'd seen in history books, and ordinarily he didn't mind spending a little time now and then talking things over with him. But right now he was hoping the old duffer wasn't going to keep him from the game going on forward with Captain Post and the steward.

"Just noticed one on the screen," the elderly journalist told him easily.

The co-pilot smiled courteously. "You must have seen a meteorite, sir. There aren't any—"

Markham Gray flushed. "I'm not as complete a space neophyte as your condescending air would indicate, Lieutenant. As a matter of fact, I'll stack my space-months against yours any day."

Bormann said soothingly, "It's not that, sir. You've just made a mistake. If a ship was within reasonable distance, the alarms would be sounding off right now.

But that's not all, either. We have a complete record of any traffic within a considerable distance, and I assure you that—"

Markham Gray pointed a finger at the lower left hand corner of the screen. "Then what is that, Lieutenant?" he asked sarcastically.

The smile was still on the co-pilot's face as he turned and followed the direction of the other's finger. The smile faded. "I'll be a *makron*!" he blurted. Spinning on his heel, he hurried forward to the bridge, muttering as he went.

The older man snorted with satisfaction. Actually, he shouldn't have been so snappy with the young man; he hated to admit he was growing cranky with age. He took up his half completed manuscript again. He really should finish this article, though, space knew, he hadn't enough material for more than a few paragraphs. Triton was a barren satellite if he'd ever seen one—and he had.

He had almost forgotten the matter ten minutes later when the ship's public address system blurted loudly.

BATTLE STATIONS! BATTLE STATIONS! ALL CREW MEMBERS TO EMERGENCY STATIONS. ALL PASSENGERS IMMEDIATELY TO THEIR QUARTERS. BATTLE STATIONS!

Battle Stations?

Markham Gray was vaguely familiar with the fact that every Solar System spacecraft was theoretic-

ally a warcraft in emergency, but it was utterly fantastic that—

He heaved himself to his feet, grunting with the effort, and, disregarding the repeated command that passengers proceed to their quarters, made his way forward to the bridge, ignoring the hysterical confusion in passengers and crew members hurrying up and down the ship's passageways.

It was immediately obvious, there at the craft's heart, that this was no farce, at least not a deliberate one. Captain Roger Post, youthful officer in command of the *Neuve Los Angeles*, Lieutenant Hans Bormann and the two crew members on watch were white-faced and shaken, momentarily confused in a situation which they had never expected to face. The two officers stood before the bridge vision screen watching, wide-eyed, that sector of space containing the other vessel. They had enlarged it a hundred-fold.

At the elderly journalist's entrance, the skipper had shot a quick, irritated glance over his shoulder and had begun to snap something; he cut it off. Instead, he said, "When did you first sight the alien ship, Mr. Gray?"

"Alien?"

"Yes, alien. When did you first sight it? It is obviously following us in order to locate our home planet." There was extreme tension in the captain's voice.

Markham Gray felt cold fingers

trace their way up his back. "Why, why, I must have noticed it several hours ago, Captain. But . . . an alien! . . . I . . ." He peered at the enlarged craft on the screen. "Are you sure, Captain? It seems remarkably like our own. I would say—"

The captain had spun back around to stare at the screen again, as though to reassure himself of what he had already seen.

"There are no other ships in the vicinity," he grated, almost as though to himself. "Besides that, as far as I know, and I should know, there are no Earth craft that look exactly like that. There are striking similarities, I'll admit, to our St. Louis class scouts, but those jets on the prow—there's nothing like them either in existence or projected."

His voice rose in an attempt to achieve decisiveness, "Lieutenant Bormann, prepare to attack."

Suddenly, the telviz blared.

Calling the Neuve Los Angeles. Calling the Neuve Los Angeles. Be unafraid. We are not hostile.

There was quiet on the bridge of the earth ship. Screaming quiet. It was seemingly hours before they had recovered even to the point of staring at one another.

Hans Bormann gasped finally, unbelievably, "How could they possibly know the name of our ship? How could they possibly know the Amer-English language?"

The captain's face was white and frozen. He said, so quietly that they

could hardly make it out, "That's not all. Our alarms still haven't been touched off, and our estimators aren't functioning; we don't know how large they are nor how far away. It's unheard of—. Somehow they've completely disrupted our instruments."

Markham Gray followed the matter with more than average interest, after their arrival at the New Albuquerque spaceport. Not that average interest wasn't high.

Finally man had come in contact with another intelligence. He had been dreading it, fearing it, for decades; now it was here. Another life form had conquered space, and, seemingly, had equipment, in some respects at least, superior to humanity's.

The court martial of Captain Roger Post had been short and merciless. Free access to the trial had been given to the press and televiz systems, and the newscasts had carried it in its entirety, partially to stress to the public mind the importance of the situation, and partially as a warning to other spacemen.

Post had stood before the raised dais upon which were seated SupSpaceCom Michell and four other high-ranking officers and heard the charge read—failure to attack the alien craft, destroy it, and thus prevent the aliens—wherever they might be from—returning to their

own world and reporting the presence of man in the galaxy.

Markham Gray, like thousands of others, had sat on the edge of his chair in the living room of his small suburban home, and followed the trial closely on his televiz.

SupSpaceCom Michell had been blunt and ruthless. He had rapped out, biting,ly, "Roger Post, as captain of the *Neuve Los Angeles*, why did you not either destroy the alien craft, or, if you felt it too strong for your ship, why did you not blast off into space, luring it away from your home planet?"

Post said hesitantly, "I didn't think it necessary, sir. His attitude was—well, of peace. It was as if we were two ships that had met by chance and dipped their flags in the old manner and passed on to their different destinations. They even were able to televiz us a message."

TheSupSpaceCom snapped, "That was undoubtedly a case of telepathy. The alien is equipped in some manner to impose thoughts upon the human brain. You *thought* the televiz was used; actually the alien wasn't speaking Amer-English, he was simply forcing thoughts into your minds."

Markham Gray, watching and listening to this over his set, shook his head in dissatisfaction. As always, the military mind was dull and unceptive. The ridiculousness of expecting Post to blast off into space in an attempt to fool the other craft

in regard to his home planet was obvious. The whole affair had taken place within the solar system; obviously the alien would know that one of Sol's nine major planets was mankind's home. Finding out which one wouldn't be too difficult a job.

Roger Post was saying hesitantly, "Then it is assumed that the alien craft wasn't friendly?"

SupSpaceCom Michell indicated his disgust with an impatient flick of his hand. "Any alien is a potential enemy, Post; that should be elementary. And a potential enemy is an enemy in fact. Even though these aliens might seem amiable enough today, how do we know they will be in the future—possibly in the far future? There can be no friendship with aliens. We can't afford to have neighbors; we can't afford to be encircled by enemies."

"Nor even friends?" Captain Post had asked softly.

Michell glared at his subordinate. "That is what it amounts to, Captain; and the thing to remember is that they feel the same way. They must! They must seek us out and destroy us completely and as quickly as possible. By the appearance of things, and partially through your negligence, they've probably won the first round. They know our location; we don't know theirs."

The supreme commander of Earth's space forces dropped that point. "Let us go back again. When you received this telepathic mes-

sage—or whatever it was—what was your reaction? Did it seem friendly, domineering, or what?"

Roger Post stood silent for a moment. Finally he answered, "Sir, I still think it was the telviz, rather than a telepathic communication, but the . . . the tone of voice seemed to give me the impression of pitying."

"Pitying!" Michell ejaculated.

The captain was nervous but determined. "Yes, sir. I had the distinct feeling that the being that sent the message felt sorry for us."

The SupSpaceCom's face had gone red with indignation.

It was three years before another of the aliens was sighted. Three hurried, crowded, harassed years during which all the Solar System's resources were devoted to building and arming a huge space fleet and rushing space defenses. The total wars of the Twentieth Century paled in comparison to the all-out efforts made to prepare for this conflict.

The second view of the alien ship was similar to the first. This time the *Pendleton*, a four-man scout returning to the Venus base after a patrol in the direction of Sirius, held the intruder in its viewer for a full five minutes. Once again, no estimation of its distance nor size could be made. All instruments pertaining to such detection seemed to fail to function properly.

And again the alien had sent a message—seemingly, at least, by telviz. *We are no danger to you, mankind. Seek your destiny in peace. Your troubles are from within.*

The Pendleton would have attempted to follow the strange craft, but her fuel tanks were nearly dry and she had to proceed to Venus. Her captain's report made a sensation.

In a way, the whole business had been a good thing for Markham Gray. As a free lancing journalist, he'd had a considerable advantage. First, he was more than usually informed on space travel and the problems relating to it; second, he had been present at—in fact, "had made himself—the first sighting of the aliens.

His articles were in continuous demand in both magazines and newspaper supplements; editors clamored for additional material from his voco-typer. There was but one complaint against his copy—it wasn't alarmist enough, sensational enough. Humanity had been whipped into a state of hysteria, an emotional binge, and humanity loved it.

And it was there that Markham Gray refused to go along. He had agreed with poor Captain Post, now serving a life sentence in the Martian prison camps; there had been no sign of hostility from the alien craft. It was man who was preparing for war—and Gray knew of no period in history in which prepara-

tions for war did not eventually culminate in one.

So it was not really strange that it was he the aliens chose to contact.

It came in the early hours of the morning. He awakened, not without a chill of fear, the sound of his telviz set in his ears. He had left it turned off, he knew that. He shook his head to clear it, impatient of the fact that with advancing years it was taking an increasing time to become alert after sleep.

He had not caught the message. For a brief moment he thought the sound had been a dream.

Then the telviz spoke again. The screen was blank. It said, *You are awake, Mr. Gray?*

He stared at it, uncomprehending.

He said, "I . . . I don't understand." Then, suddenly, he did understand, as though by an inspired revelation. Why they were able to speak Amer-English. Why their ship looked like a Terran one. Why they had been able to 'disrupt' the Earth ships' instruments.

He said haltingly, "Why are you here?"

We are familiar with your articles. You alone, Mr. Gray, seem at least to seek understanding. Before we left, we felt it our duty to explain our presence and our purpose—that is, partially.

"Yes," he said. Then, in an attempt to check the conclusion at which he had just arrived, he add-

ed, "You are going from the Solar System—leaving your home for a new one?"

There was a long silence.

Finally: *As we said, we were going to explain partially our presence and purpose, but obviously you know more than we had thought. Would you mind revealing the extent of your knowledge?*

Gray reached to the foot of the bed and took up his night robe; partly because it was chilly, partly to give himself time to consider his answer. Perhaps he shouldn't have said that. He was alone in this small house; he had no knowledge of their intentions toward him.

But he had gone too far now. He said, "Not at all. I am not sure of where we stand, but things should be much clearer shortly. First of all, your spaceships are tiny. Probably less than ten pounds."

About four, Mr. Gray.

"Which explains why our instruments did not record them; the instruments weren't disrupted, your ships were really too small to register. That's where we made our first mistake. We assumed, for no valid reason, that you were approximately our own size. We were willing to picture you as non-human and possessing limbs, organs, and even senses different from ours; but we have pictured 'aliens', as we've been calling you, as approximately our own size. Actually, you must be quite tiny."

Quite tiny, Markham Gray. Although, of course, the way we think of it is that you are quite huge.

He was becoming more confident now; widely awake, it was less strange to hear the words come from his commonplace home model televiz set. "Our second mistake was in looking for you throughout space," he said softly.

There was hesitation again, then, *And why was that a mistake, Markham Gray?*

Gray wet his lips. He might be signing his death warrant, but he couldn't stop now. "Because you are not really 'aliens,' but of Earth itself. Several facts point that way. For instance, your ships are minute models of Earth ships, or, rather, of human ships. You have obviously copied them. Then, too, you have been able to communicate with humans too easily. An alien to our world would have had much more trouble. Our ways, our methods of thinking, are not strange to you."

You have discovered a secret which has been kept for many centuries, Markham Gray.

He was more at ease now; somehow there was no threat in the attitude of the other. Gray said, "The hardest thing for me to understand is why it has been kept a secret. Obviously, you are a tiny form of Earth life, probably an insect, which has progressed intellectually as far beyond other insect forms as man beyond other mammals. Why have

you kept this a secret from humans?"

You should be able to answer that yourself, Mr. Gray. As we developed, we were appalled by the only other form of life on our planet with a developed intelligence. Why, not even your own kind is safe from your bloodlust. The lesser animals on Earth have been either enslaved by man—or slaughtered to extinction. And even your fellows in the recent past were butchered; man killed man wholesale. Do you blame us for keeping our existence a secret? We knew that the day humans discovered there was another intelligence on Earth they would begin making plans to dominate or, even more likely, to destroy us. Our only chance was to find some refuge away from Earth. That is why we began to search the other stars for a planet similar to this and suitable to our form of life.

"You could have fought back, had we attempted to destroy you," Gray said uncomfortably.

The next words were coldly contemptuous. *We are not wanton killers, like man. We have no desire to destroy.*

Gray winced and changed the subject. "You have found your new planet?"

At last. We are about to begin transportation of our population to the new world. For the first time since our ancestors became aware of the awful presence of man on

the Earth, we feel that we can look forward to security.

Markham Gray remained quiet for a long time. "I am still amazed that you were able to develop so far without our knowledge," he said finally.

There was an edge of amusement in the answering thought. *We are very tiny, Mr. Gray. And our greatest efforts have always been to keep from under man's eyes. We have profited greatly, however, by our suitability to espionage; little goes on in the human world of which we don't know. Our progress was greatly aided by our being able to utilize the science that man has already developed. You've noted, for instance, how similar our space ships are to your own.*

Gray nodded to himself. "But I'm also impressed by the manner in which you have developed some mechanical device to duplicate human speech. That involved original research."

At any rate, neither man nor we need dread the future any longer. We have escaped the danger that overhung us, and you know now that we are no alien enemies from space threatening you. We wish you well, mankind; perhaps the future will see changes in your nature. It is in this friendly hope that we have contacted humanity through you, Mr. Gray.

The elderly journalist said quietly, "I appreciate your thoughtfulness

and hope you are correct. Good luck to you in your new world."

Thank you, Markham Gray, and goodbye.

The set was suddenly quiet again.

Markham Gray stood before the assembled Military Council of the Solar System. He had told his story without interruption to this most powerful body on Earth. They listened to him in silence.

When he had finished, he waited for their questions. The first came from SupSpaceCom Michell. He said, thoughtfully, "You believe their words to be substantially correct, Gray?"

"I believe them to be entirely truthful, your excellency," the journalist told him sincerely.

"Then they are on the verge of leaving the Earth and removing to this other planet in some other star system?"

"That is their plan."

The SupSpaceCom mused aloud. "We'll be able to locate them when they blast off en masse. Their single ships are so small that they missed being observed, but a mass flight we'll be able to detect. Our cruisers will be able to follow them all the way, blasting them as they go. If any get through to their new planet, we'll at least know where they are and can take our time destroying it."

The President of the Council added thoughtfully, "Quite correct,

Michell. And in the early stages of the fight, we should be able to capture some of their ships intact. As soon as we find what kind of insect they are, our bacteriologists will be able to work on a method to eliminate any that might remain on Earth."

Markham Gray's face had paled in horror. "But why?" he blurted. "Why not let them go in peace? All they've wanted for centuries is to escape us, to have a planet of their own."

SupSpaceCom Michell eyed him tolerantly. "You seem to have been taken in, Mr. Gray. Once they've established themselves in their new world, we have no idea of how rapidly they might develop and how soon they might become a threat. Even though they may be peaceful today, they are potential enemies tomorrow. And a potential enemy is an enemy, who must be destroyed."

Gray felt sickness well through him "But . . . but this policy . . . What happens when man finally finds on his borders a life form more advanced than he—an intelligence strong enough to destroy rather than be destroyed?"

The tolerance was gone now. The SupSpaceCom said coldly, "Don't be a pessimistic defeatist, Gray."

He turned to the admirals and generals of his staff. "Make all preparations for the attack, gentlemen." • • •



by James Causey

W E TIME-STUDIED the Term. It moved with a pliant, liquid grace, its four arms flickering over the instrument panel, installing studs, tightening screws, its antennae glowing with the lambent yellow that denoted an agony of effort.

"See?" Harvey's freckled face was smug. "He rates an easy hundred and ten. Whoever took that first study—"

"I took it," I said, squinting at the stop watch.

You could hear him bite his lip. After only two weeks on the job, on a strange planet ninety light-years from home, you don't tell your boss he's cockeyed.

The Term hurried. Its faceted termite eyes were expressionless diamonds, but the antennae gleamed a desperate saffron. *If bugs could sweat*, I thought wryly. Now the



EXPLOITER'S END

PEOPLE OR TERMITES, IT'S ALL THE SAME.

THERE'S A LIMIT TO HOW FAR YOU CAN DRIVE THEM!

quartz panel installation. Those four arms moved in a blinding frenzy.

But the stop watch was faster. The second hand caught up with the Term. It passed him. Rating: Seventy-four per cent.

I tucked the clipboard under my arm, squeezed through the airlock, and down the ramp. Harvey followed sullenly. The conveyor groaned on, bringing up the next

unit, a sleek little cruiser. The Term seized a fifty-pound air wrench, fled up the ramp to the airlock.

"A dozen feet back to the operation," I pointed out. "After the next job he'll have to return forty feet. Then sixty. He's in the hole."

Harvey looked at his shoes. John Barry, the trim superintendent, came puffing down the line, his jowled face anxious about direct labor cost, the way every good super

should be. "Anything wrong, Jake?"

"He can't cut it," I said.

Barry frowned up through the airlock at the Term. Those antennae now shone the soft sad purple of despair.

We walked past the body jigs. The air was a haze of blue smoke, punctuated with yellow splashes of flame from the electronic welding guns. Terms scuttled like gigantic spiders over the great silver hulls, their antennae glowing in a pattern of swift bright harmony, right on standard, good cost. Harvey's face was rapt as he watched them. I said harshly:

"Give me your third Production Axiom."

Harvey's shoulders squared. He said stiffly: "Beauty is functional. The quintessence of grace is the clean, soaring beauty of a spaceship's hull—"

"Extrapolate, Harvey."

His lips were tight. "What I see is ugly. Terms must be taught individuality. What I see is a fascinating, deadly beauty—deadly because it's useless. We must sublimate it, grind it down, hammer it out into a useful pattern. Waste motion is a sin . . ."

"Excellent."

We turned into the administration lift, leaving the iron roar behind us, and on the way up Harvey didn't say a word. I listened for the tinkle of shattering ideals, and said patiently, "You're here to build

spaceships. To build them better and cheaper than Consolidated or Solar. Hell, we've even set up a village for the Terms! Electricity, plumbing, luxuries they wouldn't normally enjoy for the next million years—"

"Will they fire him?" Harvey's voice was flat.

My temper was shredding. "Four-day layoff. His third this month. Terms kick in most of their salary for village maintenance. They can't afford a part-time producer."

I could see that Term read out of the gang, leaving the company village, stoically, while his fellows played a wailing dirge of color on their antennae. The farewell song. I could see him trudging over the windswept peak of Cobalt Mountain, staring down at his native village, and shaking with the impact of the *Stammverband*, the tribe-mind, the ache and the longing. A wheel, shaken out of orbit. The lonely cog, searching for its lost slot. I could see that Term returning to his tribe. And how they'd tear him to pieces because he was a thing apart, now, an alien.

We walked down the gray corridor, past Psych, past the conference hall, to the silver door marked *Methods and Standards*. Harvey's blue eyes were remote, stubborn. I clapped him paternally on the shoulder. "Anyone can call one wrong, lad. Forget it."

Harvey slumped down at a com-

putor, and I walked into my private office and shut the door. Harvey's personnel dossier was in my desk. I.Q. 178, fair. Stability quotient two point eight, very bad. Adaptability rating point seven, borderline. Those idiots in Psych! Couldn't they indoctrinate a new man properly?

I waited.

In a moment Harvey came in without knocking and said, "Mr. Egan, I want to quit."

I took my time lighting a cigar, not raising my head.

His defiant, pleading look.

I blew smoke rings at the visicom and finally said, "Since you were sixteen, you've dreamed of this. Elimination tests, the weeding out, ten thousand other smart, hungry kids fighting you for this job." I tasted the words. "When your contract's up you can write your own ticket anywhere in the system."

He blurted: "I came here full of ideas about the wonderful work Amalgamated was doing to advance backward civilizations. Sure, the Terms have a union. They're paid at standard galactic rates for spacecraft assembly. But you make them live in that village. It costs to run that village. You give it to them with one hand and take it back with the other. All the time you're holding out the promise of racial advancement, individuality, some day the Terms will reach the stars. Nuts!"

"That's Guild propaganda," I said softly.

"The Guild is just a bogey you created to keep the Intersolar Spacecrafters Union in line. There's a Venusport liner due in next week. When it leaves I'll be on it!"

I played Dutch Uncle. I told him he wasn't used to Terminorb's one-and-a-half gravs, that this was just a hangover from the three to five oxygen ratio he wasn't used to. But he said no. Finally I shrugged, scribbled something on an AVO and handed it to him. "All right, Harvey," I said mildly. "Take this down to Carmody, in Psych. He'll give you a clearance."

Harvey's face went white. "Since when do you go to Psych for a clearance?"

I pressed a stud under the desk and two Analysts came in. I told them what to do and Harvey screamed; he fought and bit and clawed, he mouthed unutterable things about what we were doing to the Terms until I chopped him mercifully behind the ear.

"Poor devil," panted one of the Analysts. "Obviously insufficient indoctrination, sir. Would you mind if I spent an hour in Psych for re-orientation? He—he upset me."

My eyes stung with pride. Sam had loyalty plus. "Sure thing, Sam. You'd better go too, Barney. He said some pretty ugly things."

They dragged Harvey out and I went over to the visicom, punched



JACK SHAPIRA

a button. I was trembling with an icy rage as Carmody's lean hawk face swam into view. "Hello, Jake," he said languidly. "How's Cost?"

I told him curtly about Harvey. "Another weak sister," I rasped. "Can't you screen them any more? Didn't you note his stability index? I'm going to report this to Starza, Don."

"Relax," Carmody smiled. "Those things happen, Jake. We'll do a few gentle things with scalpel and narcosynthesis, and he'll be back in a week, real eager, the perfect cost analyst."

I'd never liked Carmody. He was so smug; he didn't realize the *sacredness* of his position. I said coldly, "Put Miss Davis on."

Carmody's grin was knowing. The screen flickered, and Fern's face came into focus. Her moist red lips parted, and I shivered, looking at her, even on a visicom screen. The shining glory of her hair, those cool green eyes. Three months hadn't made a difference.

"How was little old Earth?" I said awkwardly.

"Wonderful!" She was radiant. "I'll see you for lunch."

"Today's grievance day. Dinner?"

"I promised Don," she said demurely.

I swallowed hard. "How about the Term festival tomorrow night?"

"Well, Don sort of asked—"

I tried to laugh it off and Fern said she'd see me later and the

screen went blank and I sat there shaking.

The screen flickered again. Starza's great moon face smiled at me and said sweetly, "We're ready to start grieving."

I picked up the time studies that were death sentences for two Terms, and went down the hall to ulcer gulch, the conference room.

Lure a termite away from his tribe. Promise him the stars. Make him bust his thorax on an assembly line. He makes a wonderful worker, with reflexes twice as fast as a human's, but he still isn't an individual. Even when putting a spaceship together, he's still part of the tribe, part of a glowing symphony of color and motion. That's bad for production. Accent on individuality, that was the keynote. The Terms and their union representatives could argue a grievance right to the letter of the contract, but when it came to production standards we had them. Terminorb IV was ninety light-years from the system, and the Terms couldn't afford a home office time and motion analyst. It wasn't worth it. Terms were expendable.

Los Tichnat was committeeman at large for the Term local. He sat regally at the head of the conference table, seven gleaming chitinous feet of him, with his softly pulsating antennae and faceted eyes, and said in a clicking, humorless voice, "The first item is a second-stage grievance. Brother Nadkek, in

final assembly, was laid off for one day. Reason: He missed an operation. The grievance, of course, is a mere formality. You will deny it."

Dave Starza winked at me from behind horn-rimmed glasses. He sat like some great bland Buddha, Director of Industrial Relations, genius in outer psychology, ruthless, soft-spoken, anticipator of alien trends. He said, "In that beautiful velvet voice, 'Ordinarily, yes. In this case Nadkek wished to ask his foreman about omitting a welding phase of the operation. While the suggestion was declined, Nadkek showed unmistakable initiative.' Starza stressed the word. 'We appreciate his interest in the job. He will receive pay for the lost day.'"

Around the table, antennae flashed amazed colors. A precedent had been set. Interest in the job transcended even the Contract.

"Management *sustains* the grievance?" Tichnat droned incredulously.

"Of course," Starza said.

Nadkek left the conference room, his antennae a puzzled mauve.

"Next," Starza said pontifically.

The next grievance was simply that a foreman had spoken harshly to a Term. The Term resented it. In his tribe he had been a fighter, prime guardian of the Queen-Mother. Fighters could not be reprimanded as could spinners or workers.

Starza and Tichnat split hairs

while I dozed and thought about Fern.

Starza finally promised to reprimand the foreman. It was lovely, the way he thumped on the table, aflame with righteousness, his voice golden thunder, the martyr, hurt by Tichnat's unfairness, yet so eager to compromise, to be fair. The next grievance was work standards. Starza looked at me. This one mattered. This was cost.

I pulled out my study proofs, said, "Radnor, in final assembly. Consistently in the hole. Rating, seventy-four percent—"

"The operation was too tight, Jake. Admit it!"

The thought uncoiled darkly, thundering and reverberating in the horrified caverns of my brain.

A thoughtcaster. So the Guild had thoughtcasters now. The Guild had finally come.

I sat in the dank silence, shaking. A drop of ice crawled slowly down my temple. I stared around the conference table at Starza's frown, at those Term faces, the great faceted eyes.

"We gave this worker every chance," I said, licking my lips. "We put him on another operation. He still couldn't cut it. Even though we've got production to meet, we still give as many chances—"

The thought slashed. It grew into a soundless roar.

"Stop it, Jake! Tell them how Amalgamated, under the cloak of

liberation, is strangling the Terms with an alien culture. Tell them what a mockery their contract really is! Tell them about that Term you condemned this morning!"

I fought it. Feeling the blood run from my lip, I fought it. I'd seen strong men driven insane by a thoughtcaster within seconds. My stability index was six point three. Damned high. I fought it. I got to my feet. The room reeled. Those damned Term faces. The shining antennae. I stumbled towards the door. The thought became a whip-lash of molten fury.

"Uphold that grievance, Jake! Tell them the truth. Admit the standard was impossible to meet—"

I slammed the door. The voice stopped.

My skull was a shattered fly-wheel, a sunburst of agony. I was retching. I stumbled down the corridor to Psych. Fern was there. I was screaming at her. The Guild was here. They had thoughtcasters. My brain was melting. Fern was white-faced. She had a hypo. I didn't feel it. The last thing I saw was the glimmer of tears in her green eyes.

"... the neuron flow." Starza's voice. "No two alike. Like fingerprints. What a pity they can't refine the transmittal waves."

I tried to open my eyes.

"The Guild atomized Solar's plant on Proycon," Carmody's voice

said quietly. "It's just a question of time, Dave."

"No," Starza said thoughtfully. "Proycon was a sweatshop. I think maybe they're hinting that our production standards are a trifle rough. Look, his eyelids fluttered. Bet you he takes refuge in amnesia."

"You lose." My voice was an iron groan.

We were in Starza's office. Carmody peered at me with a clinical eye. "I took the liberty of narco-synthesis while you were out, Jake. You told us all about it. How do you feel?"

I told them how I felt, in spades.

"I want my vacation now," I said. "I've accrued seven months. I'm going to Venus," I said.

"Now, now," Starza said. "Mustn't desert the sinking ship, Jake." I shut my eyes. His voice was soothing oil. "Jake, the Guild as a whole doesn't know of this plant. Guild agents are free-lancers, in the full sense of the word. They exercise their own initiative, and only report to Guild HQ when the job is done."

"Then," Carmody said, "if we can find out who—"

"Precisely." Starza's eyes were veiled. "Incidentally, Don, you've been gone the last four days. Why?"

Carmody regarded him steadily. "Recruiting. You knew that."

"Yet you brought back only a dozen Terms."

Carmody drew a slow deep

breath. "Word's gotten around, Dave. The tribes have finally forgotten their petty wars and united against a common enemy. Us! Any Term that exhibits undesirable traits of individuality is now destroyed. I think a dozen was a good haul."

"You had the whole planet."

Carmody's grin was diamond hard. "You think maybe I spent a few hours under a Guild mind-control? Is that it?"

Starza said, "On your way out, send Los Tichnat in."

Carmody flushed. "Tichnat's the one and you know it! But if he's not—if you haven't run down the spy by tomorrow—you can accept my resignation. I saw what they left of Proyoncon."

The door slammed behind him. Starza smiled at me. "What do you think, Jake?"

"Tichnat. The second I got out of there, the thoughtcaster stopped."

"Doesn't mean a thing. They can beam through solid rock. Hundred-foot radius."

"No exploitation," I mused.

"Fanatics," Starza said. "They'd impede the progress of man. Sacrifice man's rightful place in the cosmos for the sake of—crawling things! We'll fight them, Jake!"

Tichnat entered. He stood stiffly before Starza's desk, his antennae a cheerful emerald.

Starza said carefully, "What do you know about the Guild?"

"Impractical visionaries," Tichnat clicked. "Lovers of stasis, well-meaning fools. They approached me yesterday."

A vein throbbed purple in Starza's forehead. Yet he kept his voice soft. "And you didn't report it?"

"And precipitate a crisis?" Tichnat sounded amused. "I was asked if my people were being persecuted. Had I answered in the affirmative there might have been repercussions, perhaps a sequel to Proyoncon. Oh yes, we know of Proyoncon. Your foremen are sometimes indiscreet."

"Who was the agent?" Starza breathed.

"Should I tell you, and disrupt the status quo? You would destroy the agent. In retaliation, the Guild might destroy this plant."

"Impossible! Guild agents have no such authority—"

"A chance I cannot afford to take." Tichnat was adamant.

"Amalgamated," Starza prodded, "offers a standing reward of one hundred thousand solar credits for apprehension of any Guild agent. Your village could use those credits. You could equip an atomic lab. You could maintain your own research staff—"

"Stop it." The antennae throbbed brilliantly.

"We are your friends, Tichnat."

"Symbiosis, I believe is the word," Tichnat clicked dryly. "You need us. We need your science. We need your terrifying concept of in-

dividuality. We need to lose our old ways. The dance of harvest time. The Queen-Mother. One by one the rituals drop away. The old life, the good tribal life, is dying. You sift out us misfits who chafe at tribal oneness, you offer us the planets!"

The antennae flashed an angry scarlet. "You think to keep us chained a millennium. A hundred years will suffice. We will leave you. We exiles you have made, we who would be destroyed if we dared return to the tribe, we shall rule this world! You aliens drive a hard bargain, but the dream is worth it!"

Prometheus, in a bug's body. The shining strength, and the dark terrible pride.

"It is no dream," Starza said gently. "But perhaps you go about achieving it the wrong way. You still refuse to divulge the spy?"

"I am sorry. Good day."

Starza brooded after him.

"He's a fool. But he's grasping mankind's concepts, Jake. I'd give my right eye for a good semantacist! Basic English does it. *Self, want, mine*, selfish ego-words, the cornerstones of grasping humanity. Sure, we'll raise hell with their esthetic sense, but in the end they'll thank us."

I sat, worrying about a secret fanatic somewhere in the plant who, in the holy interests of Mars-for-the-Martians, Terminorb-for-the-Terms, might soon plant an atomic war-

head in our body shop. I finally said, "What are we going to *do*?"

"Do?" Starza chuckled. "Why, slacken line speeds, lower production standards, fifty percent at least. By tomorrow we'll be down to forty jobs an hour. They want loose standards, we'll give it to them."

"But my *cost*?"

"Obscenity your cost. Look, Jake, no matter how you set an operation up, the Terms manage to work in some glittering little ritual. They *have* to create beauty. Their esthetic sense must be fed. They can't adjust to quick change. Supposing you cut line speeds by ten per cent. They adjust, but it almost kills them. Then drop thirty per cent. Their ritual loses timing, becomes discordant. What happens?"

I blinked. "They go mad."

"And our little Guild saboteur will be guilty of a few Term deaths. He'll have violated a basic Guild tenet. He'll go home with his tail between his legs. Catch?"

I caught.

By midafternoon we had the conveyor speeds down thirty per cent. The red line on my cost chart soared precariously. The entire production line slowed to a crawl. We waited.

At five o'clock it happened. Three Terms in the body shop went mad. It started a chain reaction throughout the trim line. Six more Terms ran amuck and had to be destroyed. Final assembly became a shambles. Starza called me on the visicom, de-

lighted. "Our Guild agent played right into our hands, Jake. In forcing a production slump he's harming the workers. His next move will probably be a bluff."

I wasn't so sure.

That evening the executive dining room was choked with a tight, gnawing tension. Department heads spoke in hushed whispers, eyes darting. The man across the table could be a mindless-controlled, a Guild pawn. Smile at him politely and keep your mouth shut. I ordered *thar*, a Terminorb arthapod that was usually more delicious than Venusian lobster, but tonight it tasted like broiled leather. It was like eating in a morgue.

I saw Carmody, at the next table. I nodded coolly to him and he hitched his chair over and said, "By the way, Jake, I'm sorry about Harvey. He's going back to Earth next week."

"Why?"

"His stability index was too low," Carmody said smoothly. "Sure, we could have given him the works, but you didn't want a robot."

I said deliberately, "I needed that boy, Don."

Carmody got up, his smile infinitely contemptuous. "We don't all have your stability index, Jake."

I stared after him, and the thought suddenly struck me that not once had I considered quitting, ever. Somehow, the thought disturbed me.

Abruptly the public address speaker boomed.

"Attention," Starza's voice crackled. "To the Guild agent, wherever he may be. Today you murdered thirty-seven Terms. Is this your altruism? Is this your vaunted justice?" He went on, his voice like organ music, sweeping away all doubt, making you proud and glad to be a part of Amalgamated, part of Production, when quite suddenly his voice choked off. Simultaneously another voice ripped through the hall. A cold ironic whisper, lashing at the mind.

"Altruism, yes. But not as you conceive it. Today you passed your own judgment. You have twenty-four hours to evacuate before this Plant is destroyed. The verdict is final."

The dining hall echoed with moans. Hands leaned to agonized temples. The thoughtcaster again, on a wide band frequency. Through the pain I was conscious of Starza's voice. The Guild was trying to bluff us. We wouldn't let them. I stumbled out of the hall, my teeth chattering, took the lift down to the first level, and got outside, to walk free in the park.

Here was Eden. Giant conifers and ferns wove a cool green pattern of delight, and the laughter of the crystal fountains soothed. Terms had fashioned this garden, had created a poem in living green, a quiet fugue of *oneness*, each leaf

blending exquisitely with the next, the unity, the perfect whole. For one weak moment I let the pattern seep insidiously into me, and then, ashamed, focused my eyes on that jarring splash of white in the center of the garden. The ten-foot model of the Amalgamated X-3M, squat with power, lifting on her stern jets. A symbol of Amalgamated's strength, the indomitable spirit of mankind, beauty born of pure utility. Oddly, a half-remembered poem of the Ancients flitted through my brain:

*Dirty British Coaster with her
salt-caked smokestack,
Butting through the Channel
on the mad March days—
That was man.*

On an infinity of planets he had met resistance, through force, through guile—even through beauty. And he had conquered. I drew a slow deep breath and sat on one of the benches, staring up at the gigantic horseshoe of the factory, hearing the muted hum of the atomics. Twenty-four hours.

I tried to run through my axioms, and I was suddenly terrified. I couldn't remember them! That damned thoughtcaster. Twice in one day. Perhaps there was some gradual neural disintegration. My head hurt terribly. Tomorrow I'd go to Psych for a checkup. I thought about that marble villa in Venusport, and about my bank account. Not enough. Another year, just one

more year, and I could retire, at thirty-four. I thought about the Venustian twilights, and the turquoise mists off the Deeps, and wondered dully if I'd ever see Venus or the Earth again.

I saw Fern, walking among the conifers, her face a pale mask of strain. "You heard it, Jake?"

I nodded.

We sat in the aquamarine twilight, and Fern was shivering, and I put my arm around her.

"Looks like altruism is a relative thing," I said. "What *do* they want?"

"Uncontaminated Terms," she said bitterly. "No science, no stars, no wars and no progress. A big beautiful planet-mind, the Term-mind, forever static, forever dead."

"It's a bluff," I said. "Our little fanatic's stalling for time, hoping to stampede us while he finds another way."

"For example?"

"Why do you think we insist on basic English for all Terms? Supposing a foreman should start jabbering Terminese during an operation. The Terms would revert, we'd have a line shutdown. They can't adjust—say!" A random thought was nibbling at my brain. "Where was Carmody this morning? Just before I reeled in?"

Her fine brows knitted. "Why, he went—oh, Jake, surely you don't think—?"

"Went where?"

"Down the hall. Towards Personnel."

"Towards the conference hall, you mean. He never even examined Harvey!"

"It wasn't necessary," she said uncomfortably. "Don just wanted to verify his stability index."

"Sure! So he stood outside the conference hall and put a whammy on me—"

Fern was smiling. I scowled. "It fits. It has to be him."

"Or Tichnat," she said. "Or Starza. Or me."

I stared at her. "You'd do." My voice shook. "You were gone three months. They could have got to you."

Her rich, warm laughter sifted through the twilight, and I wanted to hit her. "They did," she gurgled, "but I've decided to relent, Jake. I'll spare the plant on one condition—that you take me to the Term festival tomorrow night."

I grunted. "Carmody working overtime, I suppose?"

"If the plant's still standing."

I changed the subject.

Two hours later Starza called a council of war.

The conference room was crammed with quivering executives. Starza carefully let the tension build to a shrill crescendo before he said:

"One of you gentlemen is a Guild mindless-controlled."

Ragged silence. Starza's smile was very faint.

"You gave us an ultimatum. But destroying this plant is an admission of failure you're not willing to make—yet. You'll try another tack. You're just beginning to discover that this environment we've created for the Terms is superior to the primitive jungle. Tichnat!"

Tichnat stepped forward. His antennae were a proud, brilliant gold.

"Do you want a shutdown?" Starza asked softly.

"Are we fools?" Tichnat clicked. "To lose what we've gained? To return to our tribe? To be destroyed?"

Starza's calm gaze caressed each face, probing. "You see? Stalemate. Whoever you are, *you're bluffing*. Tomorrow our conveyor speeds return to normal. You'll do nothing. You may try to agitate the Terms, but they're satisfied—"

One of the superintendents cleared his throat. "Look," he said unsteadily, "sometimes you can't afford to call a bluff."

Starza said pleasantly, "Any resignations will be accepted right now. You can wait safely in the Term village until next week's freighter arrives. No repercussions, I promise."

The lie was blatant. Carmody stood by the door, his smile strained. It was all too obvious what would happen to any resignees.

"None?" Starza's brows rose. "I'm proud of you. That's it, gentlemen."

The next day was a frenetic nightmare. My cost dropped, but it didn't matter. That was one day when the best company man became a clock-watcher. Line foremen, department heads, cracked under the strain, and were summarily removed to Psych. Carmody

and staff worked overtime.

I toiled feverishly over operation schedules, the crazily fluctuating cost charts. My headache was gone, but I still couldn't remember my axioms! I felt guilty over not going to Psych, but there just wasn't the time.

Hell, I'd never needed indoctrination. I was an Amalgamated man through and through. Finally I grabbed an engineering manual, leafed angrily through it—and sat there, empty and shaking.

I'd gone insane.

The words were gibberish. Oh, I could read them all right, but they didn't make *sense*. What a filthy trick. Semantic block, Starza would call it. I kept staring at the meaningless words, conscious of a tearing sense of loss. And I wanted to cry.

Six o'clock was zero hour.

Six o'clock came, and the factory held its collective breath while nothing happened.

At six-thirty Starza made a long speech over the public address. About the selfless spirit of man, helping the Terms reach the stars, about how we would never admit defeat, and about how, after tonight, the Term festival would be discontinued. The Terms had adopted mankind's culture, they had no further need of their effete native customs.

At seven, Fern and I were walking past Administration towards the



lighted square-mile enclosure of the Term village. Fern had never seen a festival.

"A throwback," I said, "to their old tribal days. Their harvest, when they pay tribute to the Queen-Mother and pray for good crops and work well done. It's their yearly substitute for *stammverstand*. Back in the native villages, whenever a Term's in trouble, he goes to the council hut and the others join him in a silent, group telepathy. But we've just about weaned them, angel! They'll be individuals soon."

We walked down the deserted row of Term huts, past the council hall, to the great stone amphitheatre, and sat with the other execs. Fern was very gay and cheerful, but I kept thinking about my axioms, trying to bring them back to life. I felt dead, all dead inside.

Starza came up, frowning, and I congratulated him.

"It's too pat, Jake, it worries me. Where's Carmody?"

"Setting up those semantic reaction tests you gave him," Fern said.

"But I never gave him—"

Abruptly the lights snuffed out. At one end of the arena loomed a twelve-foot statue of a bloated Term, limned in a soft pale glow. The Queen-Mother.

The hush. Then the radiance.

Slowly the Terms filed into the arena, rank upon rank of living flame. First the fighters, their an-

tennae shining crimson and splendid against the tall night. Then the twin glows of blue that denoted the spinners, the weavers. The golden blaze of the harvesters. The lambent colors crept through the air like a mood, like a dream, and deepened into a shimmering cataract of rainbow fire, a paean of light and glory that whirled and spun in a joyous rhythm as old as the race itself.

Then—chaos.

A blinding flare cascaded from the six-foot antennae of the statue. The radiance grew, brighter than an atomic flare, more terrible than the sun. The Terms stood frozen. Beside me, Starza swore.

This wasn't in the script.

That colossal voice.

Ear-snapping clicks, and liquid vowels. Terminese. The forbidden tongue. The voice blared. I caught most of it.

"Children, you have sinned. You are defiled with the taint of alien monsters. You have failed the Queen-Mother. Return, my children, return to your tribes. Return to the tabernacle of unity, the one-in-all, the Queen-Mother! For in death there is life, and there is joy in immolation. Return!"

Lastly, the climax. That last shattering hunk of propaganda that would have been so tritely amusing if it hadn't been so terrifying.

"You have nothing to lose but your chains."

The giant antennae faded to a liquid silver. The silver of hope, of forgiveness.

For a moment I was blind. I felt Fern trembling against me. The execs were chattering like frightened sheep. Then I could see. I saw Starza. He was moving down the aisle, cursing in a tight, dull monotone.

I followed him down into the arena. The Terms stood shriveled, mute. Starza was fumbling at the base of the statue, and he said in a thick horrible voice, "Look." The loudspeaker. The coiled wiring.

The Terms stirred.

Starza leaped to the lap of the statue. He bawled, "Listen! This is sacrilege! You have been victims of a hoax—"

Not listening, they filed in silent groups out of the arena. Their antennae were the color of ashes. Starza jumped down. He pounded after them. He was shouting at Los Tichnat.

"I know," Tichnat droned. He kept walking. "You are right. It does not matter that you are right. The Queen-Mother called."

"Listen," Starza mouthed. "It was a fraud, a trick. You can't—"

"We must." Tichnat paused. For a long moment the great faceted eyes stared somberly. "It was a splendid dream, the thing you offered us. But this is the final reality. And yours is but a dream."

He tramped stolidly on, after the others. The council hall door closed.

Starza clawed at the door. It opened. He was too late. They sat silently around the great table, the faceted eyes dead, the antennae coruscating indigo, now green, now rose. Communion. The meshing of minds. Starza shouted at them. Stillness.

Starza looked blindly at me. He was shaking. "Carmody," he said. "Carmody knows the Term mind. He can do something. Come on," he said.

We found Carmody in his quarters, methodically packing. His eyebrows rose as we burst in. "Did you gentlemen ever try knocking?"

Starza just looked at him. Carmody drew a long breath. "You'll find my resignation on your desk, Dave."

"Ah?" Starza's voice was very soft.

"It's only a question of time," Carmody said. "Call it the rat deserting the ship if you like, but I'm through."

Starza was smiling, a fat man's smile. "So you really think you can pull it off," he whispered.

Carmody shrugged, and Starza calmly took out a sonic pistol and shot him in the belly.

A sonic blast hemorrhages. It rends the capillaries, ploughs the flesh into a flaccid collection of shattered nerve fibers and ruined arteries. It's a rotten way to die.

Starza watched Carmody thrash

himself to death on the floor. I turned away.

"For the record, Jake, he made a full confession. We both heard him."

"Just for the record," I said.

"It had to be him," Starza said. "That thoughtcaster blast yesterday morning made reference to your study on the Term. Only Harvey and Carmody knew about that. It couldn't have been Harvey. He cut his throat this morning.

"I've decided," Starza said. "This is a Type L planet, after all. The natives are chronically unstable. Hostile, in fact. Pursuant to Solar Regulation 3, we have the right to enforce martial law. It should be six months before an investigation. Meanwhile—"

"We'll get production," I said.

"We'll get production." He wiped his forehead, relaxed. "I'll send in a full report tonight. Better turn in, Jake," he said kindly. "I'll need you in the morning."

I turned in.

You lie awake, staring into the blackness. It gnaws.

My head throbbed. I should have felt a triumphant relief, but I could not remember my axioms, and I felt a sick dull hate for the thing the Guild spy Carmody had done to me. What happens when you strip a man of everything he believes in?

He remembers other things.

Those memories came trooping

back like ghosts and I fought them, sweating, but they came. Once upon a time, there was a starry-eyed young engineer who started out to set the galaxy on fire. But he got squeamish, somewhere along the way. So Carmody operated on him. Carmody did things to his brain, made a good production man out of him.

I remembered now.

That time I had argued with Starza about standards, nine years ago. And I had resigned. And Starza sent me to Psych.

Good old Carmody.

There never would be a white marble villa on Venus. It was a harmless dream, a substitute for what I had lost. But it didn't matter! Those superimposed patterns had been removed, that thoughtcaster had crippled my thinking, but, by Heaven, I was still an Amalgamated man! They couldn't take that away.

But Starza had been wrong about Carmody.

Nothing definite. But when you dedicate your life into extrapolating curves, frozen chunks of time and motion, into the thunder of jets lifting Amalgamated ships from Terminorb, your mind becomes a very efficient analogue computer, if you know how to use. It used it now. I fed little things, facts, variables, into that computer, and it told me three times. Probability: sixty per cent at least.

I got up, dressed stiffly. I was trembling. I could still serve, after all.

I took the lift up to Administration, and walked down that long gray corridor on leaden feet towards the illuminated rectangle of Starza's office.

I opened the door.

"Hello, darling," Fern said.

She was unhurriedly burning Starza's report. Starza sat mutely in his chair, head tilted back at an impossible angle, staring at nothing.

"It had to be you." I had never felt so tired. "You would have destroyed the plant, wouldn't you? Only I showed you another way. Make the Terms revert. And you had that hypo all ready when I reeled into Psych." I moved towards her carefully. "You're so damned altruistic. A Guild mindless-controlled," I said.

Fern's smile was compassionate. She methodically ground the ashes to powder, lifted that calm green gaze.

"Stupid words to frighten children, Jake. Yes, they kidnapped me. I never reached Earth, three months ago. I was indoctrinated—oh, they didn't have far to go. *Each race to its own fulfillment.*" Her eyes were shining. "Look out the window."

Numbly, I moved past her. I stared. In the distant blackness, a column of living flame flickered up the slope of Cobalt Mountain. Ice-

green, ruby, silver and blue. The Terms were leaving.

"They're not ready for individuality yet," Fern breathed. "In a million years perhaps. Not now. They're going home."

"To die."

"The race will live. Individuality isn't the penultimate, darling. You'll find out." I moved towards her. "You've got a very tough mind, Jake. You'll make a wonderful Guild agent—"

I got both hands on her throat.

Fern moved. Her right arm was a snake striking, and a steel strength lifted me, turning, against one and a half gravities, and the floor wavered up to hit me in the face. Something broke. I tasted blood.

Through the agony, I moved. I crawled towards her.

"They gave me six weeks of hand combat under two gravs," she said. "Soon you'll be one of us, Jake. One of the Guild!"

I stared up at her in a dull horror. I kept crawling.

"We'll heal you," Fern said. "We'll give you back the dream. We may even work together! Maybe I'll fall in love with you again, who knows?" Her eyes were brimming. She took out a sonic pistol. "It's all right, darling. I'll adjust it for knockout. In three hours we'll be on a Guild flier. Please, darling," she said, and I kept crawling. And Fern's smile was a benediction as she pulled the trigger. * * *





The Mating of the Moons

by Kenneth O'Hara

SHE CAME TO MARS IN SEARCH OF
SOMETHING, SHE KNEW NOT WHAT,
TO GIVE HER LIFE MEANING.
SHE FOUND IT... IN A WAY...

THE SUN glared, fiercely detached. The thin air suddenly seemed friendless, empty, a vast lake of poison and glassy water. All at once, the stretching plains of sand began to waver with a terrible

insubstantiality before Madeleine's eyes.

Even the Ruins of Taovahr were false. And for Madeleine, even if they were not false, there was no sign of the outer garments of dream with which, on a thousand lonely nights back home on the Earth, she had clothed those dusty scattered skeletons of crumbled stone.

Don, one of the brightest and most handsomely uniformed of all the bright young guide-hosts at Martian Haven, droned on to the finish of his machine-tooled lecture about the Ruins of Taovahr. He, of course, was the biggest chunk of falseness on Mars.

"And so folks, this is all that's left of a once great civilization. A few columns and worn pieces of stone. And we can never know now how they lived and loved and died—for no trace whatsoever of an ancient people remain. The dim, dark seas of time have swept their age-old secrets into the backwash of eternity—"

"Oh God," whispered Madeleine.

"Shhhh!" said her father. And her mother blinked at her with a resigned tolerance.

"But he's a living cliché," she said, trying to control the faintness, the dizziness, the dullness coming back as the last illusion drained away. "Even if the ruins were real, he'd make them seem trite."

"Madeleine!" her mother gasped, but in a subdued way.

"But there ought to be something special about a Martian ruin, Mother."

Don had heard her. His smile was uneasy, though politely tolerant, as all good hosts were to rich tourists. "You're hard to please, Miss Ericson. Maybe too hard." His lingering glance stopped just short of crudity. But the look made it clear that if she wanted the romance all women were assumed to expect at Martian Haven, he could provide it, as he did everything else—discreetly, efficiently and most memorably.

Mrs. Ericson giggled. She had long since abandoned any hope of Madeleine being, even by stretching the norm, a well-adjusted girl. But much faith had been placed in a Martian vacation, and hope that it would provide Madeleine with some sort of emotional preoccupation, even an affair, if need be—something, anything, that would at least make her seem faintly capable of a normal relationship with a male. Even this fellow Don. For Madeleine was past thirty-five—how far past no one discussed any more—and was becoming more tightly withdrawn every day.

Don shouted. "All right, folks! Now we wend our way back to Martian Haven, over a trail that's the oldest in the Solar System, a trail that was once a mighty highway stretching from the inland city to the great ocean that once rolled

where now there is only thousands of miles of wind-blown sands!"

The long line of exclaiming and sickeningly gullible tourists, either too young and wide-eyed to know better, or too old and desperate to admit the phoniness, ooohhhed and ahhhhed, and the rickshaws and camels, plus a few hardy adventurers on foot, turned with him as Don twisted his own beast toward Martian Haven.

Even the Ruins, she thought—they were like imported props lying in the sand, like old abandoned bits of a set for a TV production.

"Madeleine," her father said, still trying to be a big brother after years of failure. "I really don't understand this at all. Coming all the way to Mars, and you act like—well—like we'd just stepped around the corner in Chicago to some ridiculous carnival!"

"I am cursed," she whispered. "I'm tortured."

"What?" her mother said, and stared, with that child-like curiosity with which she had greeted Madeleine's advent into the world, and which she had never lost.

"Tortured by the insight that both enables and compels me to see through the sham and pretense."

Her father grunted and blinked twice. He almost always blinked twice when she began sounding pedantic like that. He suspected that she did it deliberately to show off his ignorance.

"Funny," she said, mostly to herself, "that I allowed myself to be sold this—Mars—the biggest piece of ersatz junk of all!"

"Madeleine!" her mother exclaimed.

"The advertisers got here first," Madeleine said, glancing at Don. "The hucksters." She stopped talking. Mars offered none of itself, but the others didn't understand. Mars was only what the hucksters wanted it to be.

She wondered how she could hang on to the end of the season—even though it was only three more days. They had committed themselves to a rigidly-planned schedule, a clockwork program that had them and the other "vacationing" tourists jumping and squeaking like automats: Exotic Martian sports. Martian tennis played on a hundred-yard court with the players hopping through the rarified air and lower gravity with an almost obscene abandon. Swimming in a strangely buoyant water, called, of course, Martian water. Sandsled racing. Air-hopping with the de-gravity balloons. Spectator sports, including gladiators who leaped into the phony canals and fought to the death against the hideous-looking Martian rat-fish. There were many other "activities", in none of which Madeleine had been able to interest herself.

This last three days promised something called the "Martian Love

Ritual under the Double Moons." And a climactic treasure hunt among the subterranean Martian labyrinths. They too, Madeleine was sure, were artificial.

Mrs. Ericson adjusted her polaroid glasses and waved her rickshaw boy into his harness, where his thighs tensed for the long haul. He was an incredibly huge man, taller even than those specially-bred movie stars, who averaged eight feet tall. Madeleine felt faint and clung to her camel. The Martian camels were coughing and wheezing and the sun glared horribly in the early afternoon.

Mr. Ericson looked with guarded apprehension at the six-legged camel. Don pulled him aboard. "What a helluva beast!" laughed Ericson. Earth camels specially bred by the big travel agencies to have a so-called "unearthly" appearance. Sad creatures with two extra, dangling limbs and a single, half-blind, blood-shot eye, watery and humbly resentful.

Pathetic mutation, Madeleine thought. Like those horrid rat-fish, like the canals and the games and the ruins and those silly rituals. All ersatz.

The caravan moved along the high ridge, a narrow trail that wound back toward Martian Haven along the edge of the eroded cliffs.

"Maybe the only thing that would satisfy Madeleine," her father said, "would be a real Martian."

"But that's not in the brochure," Don said.

"What's Mars without a Martian?" giggled Mrs. Ericson.

In her own insular little world, which had been the only one Madeleine had ever been able to tolerate at all, she swayed and bumped to the camel's movements. "One thing sure, Don," she said softly. "There were *real* Martians once. So why all the phony props? You can't tell me this nonsense is better than the facts about the real Martians."

"Ask the boys who built this place. They hired me, they make the rules," Don said. He did not look at her.

"How did you ever end up with a job like this, Don?"

"The outfit that built the Haven hired all the old Martian colonists and their descendants, any who wanted to work for them. So I took a job. Pay's good. It's seasonal. Anyway, I like Mars."

"Sure," she said. "You must love it—to corrupt it like this."

"Mars was here, it'll still be here after the last tourist goes."

She laughed thinly. Don, with her, was trying to play another role, one he hoped she might find interesting. "You're a symbol of the phoniness, Don. Trained in the special host schools. Selected for your beautiful resemblance to a statue of Adonis. Artificially created to be an ever-smiling host of good-will, just like these pathetic camels have been

bred for an exotic touch. No real intelligence, Don, nor originality. And everything you do or say is right out of the text book on how to make friends and influence tourists."

Don didn't look at her. His fingers trembled on the camel's reins.

"What is this fascinating-sounding 'Ritual of Love' going to be like?" giggled Mrs. Ericson.

"It's an authentic exploitation of actual rituals once held by the Martians," Don said. "It has a pagan religious significance. The moons were male and female, and when they—ah—united their light, the Martians held feasts, fertility rituals—highly symbolic rites."

"Only symbolic?" said Mrs. Ericson, pretending blase disappointment.

"Well," grinned Don, "the Martians were only human. Just as—ah—well—I must say that a number of tourists have a tendency to chuck their inhibitions during the rituals. But if not on Mars, then where?"

"I still say," yelled Mr. Ericson from his camel, "that you should spring a live Martian on us."

"We get plenty of calls for them," Don said. "But so far we haven't been able to scare up any."

"What did they look like?" asked Mrs. Ericson.

"Nobody knows. The only Martians around now are—ghosts," Don said, with a strange softness. "A few old prospectors, fakirs, beggars live

in these hills—hermits. They claim they see Martians, know they're here. They believe in ghosts. The Martian sun drives them crazy."

"Like that old man we saw coming out here," said Mr. Ericson.

Don nodded. "They're dangerous. You must stay away from them, you understand. Or you'll get the contamination."

For the first time, Madeleine felt that Don was touching something real. She straightened. "Contamination?"

"Those crazy old guys are like lepers. They stay apart from everybody else. But if you go to them, you pay for it. And if you're contaminated, it'll cost. If you really get it, you can't be cured at all. You die."

No one said anything. Odd, Madeleine thought, his coming out with scare talk. Didn't seem to be good propaganda. Then she got it, and laughed a little. "Sensationalism," she said. "Pure bunk."

"What is this contamination?" Mr. Ericson said.

"An alien virus. Martian. Nobody's been able to isolate it. If a case isn't too bad we cure it in the antiseptic wards, but otherwise—well, you just wither away and die in a few hours. You're all shriveled up and look like a mummy."

"That's horrible!" whispered Mrs. Ericson.

"They're diseased fakirs who say they can read the sands, predict your

future, bring you paradise, for five credits. But stay away from them!"

And just at that moment, as though on cue, Madeleine thought, the old man stepped out about fifty feet in front of Don's camel, and blocked the narrow trail.

"Caravan halt!" Don yelled and raised his hand.

Not knowing why, laughing and exclaiming, the long line of the caravan halted. And Madeleine stared ahead into the old man's face. The old man was dirty, bent and very ancient and hairless, with only a soiled robe of crude but heavy cloth hanging on his frame. There was nothing that seemed very much alive about him except his eyes.

Even he was a stereotype, she thought. The classic old hermit character. The yogi, the magi, the wise old man, the Hindu Rope Trick, look into my crystal ball, I am the teller of the sands—

But her heart was pounding extraordinarily loud. His eyes—

Don jumped from his camel. His hands were shaking as he raised his quirt. "Out of the way!" he shouted, then turned slightly. "Don't come any nearer, folks! It'll be all right. I'll have him out of the way in a minute."

"We'll all be contaminated," whispered Mrs. Ericson.

"Just stay clear. You have to contact them directly to be contaminated," Don said.

He stopped five feet from the

old man and raised his quirt. The old man looked only at Madeleine, then shook his head slowly up and down as though reaffirming some special secret. As though he shared some secret with her.

"Five credits," the old man said, in a loud whisper. "And I'll read the sands for you. The Martian sands know all your secrets and the timelessness of your dreams. Let them speak to you, through me, for five credits."

Don swung the quirt savagely. It was heavy, and it thudded and smacked across the old man's face and chest. He fell in the middle of the trail.

The sun wheeled crazily. Madeleine could hear her mother screaming and her father yelling as she moved, as though in a trance, toward the old man. Her feet slipped, stumbled in the shale. The old man crawled a little, got up, fell again.

She was screaming at Don to stop.

The old man had fallen to one side and the trail was clear now.

"Let him alone! Let him alone!" Madeleine screamed. "He's out of the way!"

"Madeleine!" Mr. Ericson shouted. "Come back! Get away from that beggar, right now, or we return to Earth in the morning!"

For the first time in her life, that she could remember, her father's threats meant nothing. But the old fear was there as she moved toward

the Martian hermit, on a painful tightwire of impulse between threat and desire. She had learned that for any real feeling—fear, joy, pain, or even the dimmest-remembered pleasure, you paid a dear price. But she moved on.

The old man's face was bleeding. She saw the long welts of red on the flesh, and the blood-flecks and tortured little broken channels of blood crossing it. Sound roared around her as she eluded Don's hands and knelt down, took the old man's head in her arms. She tilted her canteen to his lips.

There was a kind of strange triumph in the old man's eyes as he peered past her for only a moment and looked at Don. And from somewhere—Madeleine couldn't even tell whether it was real—came a thought.

"Madeleine—come back. Come back when you can. And you will find joy."

Later, she knew how she kicked and screamed at them as they dragged her away. How Mrs. Ericson was embarrassed by the display, and how her father refused to touch her because of the fear of contamination. And her mother weeping, later, because of the disgrace and because of what the other guests would think.

In the shiny antiseptic ward at Martian Haven, the virus was burned out by a certain number of roentgens of carefully proportioned X-rays, gamma rays and neutron

bombardment. She kept thinking of the old man's eyes, of the stray thought that promised joy.

She kept seeing the old man lying off the trail among the rocks, how he had raised himself on his elbow, and how he wagged the blood-clot of his head in the glaring sun as they dragged Madeleine away.

Occasionally she thought of the whole project—in Mars, Mecca of Earth tourists, Martian Haven, Dream City of the Solar System—that was so colorful and impressive and exotic to others, and she wondered if it was all really as ridiculous as it seemed to her.

She lay there in the dark of the room as evening reached over the dead sea bottom toward the edifice that was Martian Haven. Out there in the big amphitheatre, resurrected supposedly from old Martian ruins, Martian Haven, with all of its rich, efficient facilities and staff, was preparing the stage, props and guests for the Love Ritual of the Double Moons.

The core and centerpiece of Martian Haven was a great cubistic hotel, with the two Martian canals on two sides, renovated, of course, and a five-mile-long artificial lake on a third side. It was somehow designed, in the middle of all that vast emptiness of dead sea, sand and eroded rock, to have a not-ungraceful look of insubstantiality, as though at any moment it might open great wings of some sort and take off into the

Martian nowhere by which it was so overwhelmingly surrounded. The side that faced the lake curved in a half-moon, so that it commanded a wide prospect to the eroded hills that had once been mountains to the west and to the east thousands of unbroken miles of desert, that had once, they said, been an ocean.

When Madeleine opened her eyes, it was night. On many a starry night she had lain inside walls not so different from these, and felt much the same, she thought, surrounded by a desert of her own. Away off there in the blackness, Earth shone palely—and she might as well never have left it at all.

And then again she saw the old hermit's eyes out there in the dark, his burning eyes where there should be only sterile emptiness in the night. And his voice calling where there would otherwise have been only the dusty echoes of an arid past.

Outside now the tourists were gathering in the double moonlight. The weird extrapolation of Earth music that was supposed to be the strains of Martian rhythms drifted to her, and lights flickered from burning tapers where dancers undulated and writhed fitfully. A libidinous expectancy was as heavy as a thick scent in the night.

Then, only for a moment, she despised herself for not being with the others, for never having been able to participate in the futile

make-believe. She felt like a child who had never grown beyond the stage of the most old-fashioned fairy tales. Someone who had gone beyond the looking-glass and had never been able to get back, but who had never quite been able to forget the world from which she had come.

She could hear her parents and Don talking in the next room.

"It's a shame for her to miss the ritual of the double moons," Don said.

"She's always been that way," Mr. Ericson said. "Staying by herself."

"We've tried everything," said Mrs. Ericson.

"She's spent half her life on an analyst's couch," said Mr. Ericson.

"She wouldn't even," Mrs. Ericson said, "fall in love with her *analyst*!"

"She was only in love once," said Mr. Ericson, "and that had to be with an idiot who was always writing sonnets."

SANDSLED PO
PRIVATE
MARTIAN I



"A poet," said Don. "There used to be a lot of poets."

"But not in my life," said Mr. Ericson.

"Maybe," Don said, "your daughter expected a little bit too much from Mars."

"Don," Mrs. Ericson pleaded, "maybe *you* can do something."

"I'll be glad to try," Don said.

So Madeleine lay there and waited for Don, the perfect host, who could supply everyone at Martian Haven with whatever was necessary to insure a pleasant day.

Later, though she did not turn or make any sign of noticing, she knew he had entered the room and was standing over her. She could see the periphery of his giant shadow projected by moonlight over the colored glass.

"Madeleine—we've got a date for the ritual tonight."

"That's odd, Don. I don't remember it."

"But you didn't say you *wouldn't* attend it with me, when I suggested it this morning."

"Well, Don, this is an official rejection of your proposal."

She saw his shadow bend, his body drop down beside the couch. She felt his hands on her arm. The peculiar fright went through her.

"You won't listen, Madeleine, but whatever you're looking for here—please forget it! The rituals will help you forget. Try it, Madeleine! Please—"

Why did he, all at once, sound so desperate?

"With you?"

"Why not?"

"You're just an artificial dream, Don, that comes true seasonally for people so sick that they can convince themselves you're real—for a price."

"Well, Madeleine—are you so different?"

"I guess I am."

"You just want the impossible. The others—they want little dreams we can give them easily."

There was a strain, a tension in him, in his hands, in his voice. Suddenly, his hands held her, and his face was close above her lips. "You're still young and beautiful to me," he whispered.

She turned her face away, and gazed at the tattered and splendid veils of moonlight as Deimos and Phobos neared one another, with undying eagerness to consummate the timeless ritual.

Dimly, she could hear the communal voices rising to desire.

*"Twin Moons, Love Moons,
whirling bright,*

*Bring me Martian love to-
night!"*

If you could expect too much from Mars, then where could one find the answer to the intangible wish? Sirius. Far Centauris. And at the end of it, the hucksters, the phony props, would be there first.

Some people should stay on

Earth, she thought, those who are so hard to please. There the veils of space and time might keep the last illusions living. Once you find that even the farthest star is illusory, there's no place left to go.

His lips were near her lips. His voice was low. "You are different!" His throat trembled. "You really are. But—I wonder if you're different enough."

She was aware of the awful gnawing emptiness within her that was only intense desire too frightened to be free. And then his lips were crushing to hers and she allowed it, for she knew what was to be her only way out, and the promise of union was a haze in the room like the veils of light from the moons of Mars that joined against the starlight of heaven.

There was more than the ardent in his intensity. A kind of desperation, his desire to please going beyond the line of duty. The old consuming terror returned.

She pushed him away. His hands reached, his body crushed. Panic. She felt unable to breathe, and she started to scream. His hand was over her mouth.

"Don't look any deeper, don't probe any farther!" he said, like a suddenly terrible threat. "I beg you, don't do it! You're different—beautifully different, Madeleine. But not different enough! None of them ever are!"

She squirmed away, onto the floor

between the glass and the couch, and scurried toward the door. She could hear the gasping, the sobbing desperation in his voice, and his shadow lengthened across the walls.

Then, as she hesitated in the doorway, he was gone.

She put on a nylon hiking suit and left the room. The silence of the hall was not real, and the emptiness was not really emptiness. It was like waking and being exasperatingly aware of only the fleeting end of a dream. And as she slipped out a side entrance, even the wailing of exotic musical instruments seemed in a sense not real. Even the silence, the feeling of being followed, watched, even that seemed artificial—it was impossible to substantiate the suspicion.

Her palms were wet as she slipped along the wall toward the garage where the sandsleds were kept. From the amphitheatre she could hear the rituals, the intercessions, comminations, hymns, libations, incense-burning, and who knew what else. She saw the reflection of chrome and artificial glitter disguised as Martian authenticity, the lights hanging like a grove of pastel moons, and the shrill empty laughter of girls uncoiling as bright as tinsel through the sluggish Martian evening. And in spite of the sound and elaborate pretension, it all had the undying feel of lugubrious solitude.

It had, for a doomed generation

driven into inescapable conformity, the necessary quality of a dream in which a stubborn unconsciousness seeks ever for truth. And later, back on Earth, in the rut and groove, it would remain only a dream no one ever talked about to anyone else. After all, it would simply be something that happened on another world.

She gave one brief, bitter laugh. And even on another world the last desperate dream was false.

There might be something to be said for release through a pagan orgy under the double moons; she had no moral scruples about it. But the paganism would have to be real, that was the thing. Besides, it was too late. For a moment she pressed her flattened hands against her face and felt tears squeezing through the tightly-locked fingers. She felt as though she might explode somewhere inside and realized how the invisible edges of living had cut her soul to pieces.

It wasn't even self-pity any more. It had grown above self-pity to a realism beyond tragedy.

She felt icy and empty and alone as she lit a cigarette. Through the taper smoke, the glowing amphitheatre seemed like a golden porpoise lapped in dawn, and coupled with the expanse of the Haven it nestled in the night to resemble a sleeping question mark, an entity gay and sad and full of what was called life.

There was no turning back now. There was no turning back, even to Earth, for that would be the most humiliating defeat of all.

Then she was inside the first sanded. The sled moved noiselessly out of the garage and whispered away over the sands.

After only a few minutes the radio frightened her with an abrupt voice like that of a disembodied spirit.

"Madeleine!"

She looked back through the trailing skeins of moonlight. A dark spot was overtaking her. She couldn't go any faster. Evidently Don had one of those racing sleds that hardly seemed to touch the sand at all.

"Madeleine! Please—for God's sake, don't see that old hermit!"

"For the sake of which God, Don? I understand the Martians had more than one."

"Madeleine! I'm begging you to come back!"

"Why?"

"You know why."

"The contamination!" She laughed. "Your melodramatic devices don't frighten me."

"It's true. You'll die—! Come back!"

"To what?"

"We'll talk about it! Just come back!"

"What's so dangerous, Don, about my not accepting things here as they're supposed to be?"

His voice tightened. "Just stop, stop and come back!"

She didn't stop, didn't bother to answer. She circled the sandsled among the hills, skirting the rocky clefts with a reckless abandon she had never felt before, and her face was flushed as she leaned her head back and laughed.

"Madeleine!"

It was the last time he called to her. After that, the silence conveyed an intensity of purpose far stronger than verbal entreaties.

She swerved the sandsled dangerously among the erosions, and felt the grinding strain at the base of her skull as the sled bounded from one spire and careened toward another, which she barely avoided smashing into head-on.

She recognized the area. She leaped out of the car and ran, hearing the pursuing sandsled stop somewhere below her as she climbed.

For an instant dizziness threatened, and the surroundings and the motions of Don and herself and the love moons in the sky seemed wildly, almost dangerously abstracted, as if viewed through drug-glazed eyes. A panicky wash of blood came to her face and she struggled for breath, wanting to cry out. It passed. Her mind groped for reason and the terror receded.

She went on up to the ridge and found the old man waiting. From that high ridge where the night

wind cut coldly toward the Martian south, the lights of the rituals in the amphitheatre of Martian Haven flickered in a misty halo far away, like phosphorescent globes of spooky glowing, and frenetic dancings and shiftings of crazed flames.

The old man had a vague, insubstantial look, only his eyes seemed real, almost too real, in their intensity as he looked at her. He was propped against a block of eroded rock and the wind rustled the fringes of his ragged robe.

She sat beside him, their shoulders touched. And then, as though slowly dissolving through some chemical reaction, the old man began to fade. Vaguely Don was there, too, in a nebulous transparency like the old man. And Madeleine lay there, her face pressed into the sand. On Mars one should expect, without shock, a different kind of reality.

Their voices weren't really voices. Just thoughts, thoughts in the head, feelings, but nothing solid. The thoughts of Don and the old man seemed to be in some kind of time-worn conflict.

"You encouraged her," Don was thinking.

"Those who can see a little should be urged to try to see more. Maybe, sometime, we'll find one who is different enough to come through to us."

"No! It never works that way! They just—die."

"Maybe they won't—always," the old man thought.

Madeleine felt strangely disoriented, as though dreaming with delirious fever. All time and space seemed for a moment to be enclosed within that rocky space, itself unmoored and unhelmed upon a dark and compassless ocean.

Martians, Martians all around, but not a one to see. Like disembodied spirits, they had long ago evolved beyond confinement to fleshly bodies. But Earth people suspected there was something, so the younger ones, like Don, allowed suspicion to take any stereotyped, acceptable form. But the oldsters believed in being honest. Let those who can see—see.

"Madeleine!" Don was thinking, desperately, as desperate as only pure feeling can be. "Go back—back to the Haven. You can still go back!"

"But she cannot," the old man said. "For those who come this far, there's never anything to go back to."

"No—I cannot," Madeleine thought. "I don't want to go back."

"All right," Don thought after a while. "All right, Madeleine."

Then she was on her feet and moving over sand and stone that seemed alive toward the Ruins of Taovahr—but they were no longer ruins. She heard the murmur of sea-tides and warmer winds sighing over a younger land.

The sterile sand blossomed. Aridity drifted away. "*Don! Is that you, Don?*"

Don seemed to be somewhere, felt rather than heard, sensed, not seen. And instead of ruins, the high white walls and rising towers surrounded by gardens, fountains, and through the gardens a stream of clear water, soft with the pads of giant water lilies, trailing like glass under the moonlight and sympathetic shadows of leaves.

"Don! You knew what real living was in your youth. It was way, way back in time. Didn't you? And only if you're really living do you know where you're going, and you knew, didn't you? You gave up the machines, and went on to freedom. You escaped the confining flesh that can be caught up in war, and in hopeless peonage to 'the radios and teevee and radar and thundering jets that drown out the song of real life, and a horde of cunningly made, treacherous machines—"

"Madeleine. Join us—the way we are now. You can do it—"

"I—I can't see you, Don."

"You don't have to. You just think about it and join us, all of us—"

"Just—just a spirit of some kind, Don—is that it?"

"Yes, yes—something like that! You can't explain it! Just do it!"

It was too late, she knew that now. "We're old, too old, where I come from, Don. When I was very

young, I might have done it." Only the wonder-filled child can go through the looking glass and—stay.

And he knew she was right, that she was too old. But the old man had promised her a moment of joy. She suddenly saw him—Don—the bright, strong man waiting across the stream. "It's what you brought to me," he said softly. "When we were young we looked this way—and we were real."

She moved toward the water and her arms lifted to him. At first she couldn't recognize the woman who bathed there. From the water's surface a slight vapor drifted, and she saw the wet gleam of naked arms as they lowered and raised and the water shone on the pale loveliness of unashamed nakedness. And then she knew that the woman there, her hair floating over the water, was Madeleine. She whispered her own name.

He took her in his arms, and she could hear her breath joining his as the mist drifted up among the buttressed writhings of the trees. She was laughing, her breasts pressed to the damp richness of the loam, and in the water she could see her face, white, with sharp shadows under the eyes and a high look of joy.

"I love you, Madeleine."

His face was above her and his lips crushed to hers, and she could hear the stream flowing all around her like blood in her ears.

"I love you, Madeleine."

A whisper went through the gray starlight that Mars was turning toward morning. And the waters of the mind drained away, leaving high and clear the common desire that stands like a drowned tower.

"I love you, Madeleine."

She could hear it all fading away—her own joy, the fires—as if everything were melting, a wax candle dying, a wine glass draining, a soft light dimming . . .

They had found her by following the pathway left by bits of abandoned clothing. There was nothing but the rescue party and thousands of miles of waste around Madeleine where she lay in the ancient, dried-up creek bed. And she was shriveled and dried out and resembled, as Don had predicted, a mummy. But there was a kind of softness of repose on her face that hadn't been there before. Don stood back and looked down at her and thought about the waste.

Mr. Ericson ran forward in his purple shirt and fell to his knees whispering, "Madeleine, we've found you! Madeleine—Madeleine—can't you hear your Daddy?"

"We give you anything you want," Don whispered, but no one heard him.

And while Mr. Ericson wept, Mrs. Ericson slumped into Don's arms as though it was the end of the world. • • •

A TRAVELER

by August Derleth

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS ESCAPE EVILS BY RUNNING
AWAY FROM THEM ... BUT IT MAY HELP!



IN TIME



"TELL ME WHAT time is," said Harrigan one late summer afternoon in a Madison Street bar. "I'd like to know."

"A dimension," I answered. "Everybody knows that."

"All right, granted. I know space is a dimension and you can move forward or back in space. And, of course, you keep on aging all the time."

"Elementary," I said.

"But what happens if you can, move backward or forward in time? Do you age or get younger, or do you keep the status quo?"

"I'm not an authority on time, Tex. Do you know anyone who traveled in time?"

Harrigan shrugged aside my question. "That was the thing I couldn't get out of Vanderkamp, either. He presumed to know everything else."

"Vanderkamp?"

"He was another of those strange people a reporter always runs into. Lived in New York—downtown, near the Bowery. Man of about forty, I'd say, but a little on the old-fashioned side. Dutch background, and hipped on the subject of New Amsterdam, which, in case you don't know, was the original name of New York City."

"Don't mind my interrupting," I cut in. "But I'm not quite straight on what Vanderkamp has to do with time as dimensions."

"Oh, he was touched on the subject. He claimed to travel in it. The fact is, he invented a time-traveling machine."

"You certainly meet the whacks, Tex!"

"Don't I!" He grinned appreciatively and leaned reminiscently over the bar. "But Vanderkamp had the wildest dreams of the lot. And in the end he managed the neatest con-

juring trick of them all. I was on the *Brooklyn Enterprise* at that time; I spent about a year there. Special features, though I was on a reporter's salary. Vanderkamp was something of a local celebrity in a minor way; he wrote articles on the early Dutch in New York, the nomenclature of the Dutch, the history of Dutch place-names, and the like. He was handy with a pen, and even handier with tools. He was an amateur electrician, carpenter, house-painter, and claimed to be an expert in genealogy."

"And he built a time-traveling machine?"

"So he said. He gave me a rather hard time of it. He was a glib talker and half the time I didn't know whether I was coming or going. He kept me on my toes by taking for granted that I accepted his basic premises. I got next to him on a tip. He could be close-mouthed as a clam, but his sister let things slip from time to time, and on this occasion she passed the word to one of her friends in a grocery store that her brother had invented a machine that took him off on trips into the past. It seemed like routine whack stuff, but Blake, who decided what went into the *Enterprise* and what didn't, sent me over to Manhattan to get something for the paper, on the theory that since Vanderkamp was well-known in Brooklyn, it was good neighborhood copy.

"Vanderkamp was a sharp-eyed

little fellow, about five feet or so in height, and I hit him at a good time. His sister said he had just come back from a trip—she left me to draw my own conclusions about what kind of trip—and I found him in a mild fit of temper. He was too upset, in fact, to be truculent, which was more like his nature.

"Was it true, I wanted to know, that he'd invented a machine that traveled in time?"

"He didn't make any bones about it. 'Certainly,' he said. 'I've been using it for the last month, and if my sister hadn't decided to blab nobody would know about it yet. What about it?'"

"You believe it can take you backwards or forwards into the past or the future?"

"Do I look crazy? I said so, didn't I?"

"Now, as a matter of fact, he *did* look crazy. Unlike most of the candidates for my file of queer people, Vanderkamp actually looked like a nut. He had a wild eye and a constantly working mouth; he blinked a good deal and stammered when he was excited. In features he was as Dutch as his name implied. Well, we talked back and forth for some time, but I stuck with him and in the end he took me out into a shed adjoining his house and showed me the contraption he'd built.

"It looked like a top. The first thing I thought of was Brick Bradford, and before I could catch my-

self, I'd asked, 'Is that pure Brick Bradford?'

"He didn't turn a hair. 'Not by a long shot,' he answered. 'H. G. Wells was there first. I owe it to Wells.'

"I see," I said.

"The hell you do!" he shot back. "You think I'm as nutty as a fruit-cake."

"The idea of time travel is a little hard to swallow," I said.

"Sure it is. But me, I'm doing it. So that's all there is to it."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Vanderkamp," I said, "I'm a dummy in scientific matters. I have all I can do to tell a nut from a bolt."

"That I believe," he said.

"So how do you time travel?"

"Look," he said, "time is a dimension, like space. You can go up or down this ruler," he snatched a steel ruler and waved it in front of me, "from any given point. But you move. In the dimension of time, you only seem to move. You stand still; time moves. Do you get it?"

"I had to confess that I didn't."

"He tried again, with obviously strained patience. Judging by what I could gather from what he said, it was possible for him—so he believed—to get into his machine, twirl a few knobs, push a few buttons, relax for any given period, and end up just where he liked—back in the past, or ahead in the future. But wherever he ended up, he was still in this same spot. In

other words, whether he was back in 1492 or ahead in 2092, the place he got out of his time machine was still his present address.

"It was beyond me, frankly, but I figured that as long as he was a little touched, it wouldn't do any harm to humor him. I intimated that I understood and asked him where he'd been last.

"His face fell, his brow clouded, and he said, 'I've been ahead thirty years.' He shook his head angrily. 'What a time! I'll be seventy, and you won't even be that, Mr. Harri-gan. But we'll be in the middle of the worst atomic war you ever dreamed about.'

"Now this was before Hiroshima, quite a bit. I didn't know what he was talking about, but it gives me a queer feeling now and then when I think of what he said, especially since it's still short of thirty years since that time.

"It's no time to be living here," he went on. "Direct hits on the entire area. What would you do?"

"I'd get out," I said.

"That's what I thought," he said. "But that kind of warfare carries a long way. A long way. And I'm a man who loves his comforts, reasonably. I don't intend to set up housekeeping in equatorial Africa or the forests of Brazil."

"What did you see thirty years from now, Mr. Vanderkamp?" I asked him.

"Everything blown to hell," he

answered. 'Not a building in all Manhattan.' He leered and added, 'And everybody who'll be living here at that time will be scattered into the atmosphere in fragments no bigger than an amoeba.'

"You fill me with anticipation," I said.

"So I went back to my desk and wrote the story. You could guess what kind it had to be. 'Time Travel Is Possible, Says Amateur Scientist!'—that kind of thing. You can see it every week, in large doses, in the feature sections of some of the biggest chain papers. It went over like an average feature about life on the moon or prehistoric animals surviving in remote mountain valleys, or what have you. Just what Vanderkamp went back to after I left, I don't know, but I have an idea that he gave his sister a devil of a time."

Vanderkamp stalked into the house and confronted his sister.

"You see, Julie—a reporter. Can't you learn to hold your tongue?"

She threw him a scornful glance. "What difference does it make?" she cried. "You're gone all the time."

"Maybe I'll take you along sometime. Just wait."

"Wait, wait! That's all I've been doing. Since I was ten years old I've been waiting on you!"

"Oh, the hell with it!" He turned on his heel and left the house.

She followed him to the door and

shouted after him, "Where are you going now?"

"To New Amsterdam for a little peace and quiet," he said testily.

He threw open the thick-walled door of his time-machine and pulled it shut behind him. He sat down before the controls and began to chart his course for 1650. If his calculations were correct, he would shortly find himself in the vicinity of that sturdy if autocratic first citizen of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant, as well as Governor Stuyvesant's friend and neighbor, Heinrich Vanderkamp. He gave not even a figurative glance over his shoulder before he started out.

When he emerged at last from his machine, he was in what appeared to be the backyard of a modest residence on a street which, though he did not know it, he suspected might be the Bouwerie. At the moment of his emergence, a tall, angular woman stood viewing him, open-mouthed and aghast, from the wooden stoop at the back door of her home. He looked at her in astonishment himself. The resemblance to his sister Julie was uncanny.

With only the slightest hesitation, he addressed her in fluent Dutch. "Pray do not be disturbed, young lady."

"A fine way for a gentleman to call!" she exclaimed in a voice considerably more forceful than her

appearance. "I suppose my father sent you. And where did you get that outlandish costume?"

"I bought it," he answered, truthfully enough.

"A likely tale," she said. "And if my father sent you, just go back and tell him I'm satisfied the way I am. No woman needs a man to manage her."

"I don't have the honor of your father's acquaintance," he answered.

She gazed at him suspiciously from narrowed eyes. "Everyone in New Amsterdam knows Henrik Van Tromp. He's as unloved as yonder bumblebee. Stand where you are and say whence you came."

"I am a visitor in New Amsterdam," he said, standing obediently still. "I confess I don't know my way about very well, and I chose to stop at this attractive home."

"I know it's attractive," she said tartly. "And it's plain to see you're a stranger here, or you'd never be wearing such clothes. Or is it the fashion where you come from?" She gave him no opportunity to answer, but added, after a moment of indecision, "Well, you look respectable enough, though much like my rascally cousin Pieter Vanderkamp. Do you know him?"

"No."

"Well, no matter. He's much older than you—near forty blessed years. You're no more than twenty, I don't doubt."

Involuntarily Vanderkamp put his hand to his cheek, and smiled as he felt its smooth roundness. "You may be right, at that," he said cryptically.

"You might as well come in," she said grudgingly. "What with the traffic on the road outside, the Indians, and people who come in such flighty vehicles as yours, I might as well live in the heart of the colony."

He looked around. "And still," he said, "it is a pleasant spot—peaceful, comfortable. I'm sure a man could live out his days here in contentment."

"Oh, could he?" she said belligerently. "And where would I be while this went on?"

He gazed at her beetling nose, her jutting chin. "A good question," he muttered thoughtfully.

He followed her into the house. It was a treasury of antiquities, filling him with delight. Miss Anna Van Tromp offered him a cup of milk, which he accepted, thanking her profusely. She talked volubly, eyeing him all the while with the utmost curiosity, and he gathered presently that her father had made several attempts to marry her off, disapproving of her solitary residence so far from the center of the city; but she had frowned upon one and all of the suitors he had encouraged to call on her. She was undeniably impressive, almost formidable, he conceded privately, with a

touch of the shrew and harridan. Life with Miss Anna Van Tromp would not be easy, he reflected. But then, life with his sister Julie was not easy, either. Miss Anna, however, had not to face atomic warfare; all she had to look forward to in fourteen years was surrender to the besieging British, which she would have no trouble in surviving.

He settled down to his ingratiating best and succeeded in making a most favorable impression on Miss Anna Van Tromp before at last he took his leave, carrying with him a fine, hand-wrought bowl with which the lady had presented him. He had a hunch he might come back. Of all the times he had visited since finishing the machine, he knew that old New Amsterdam in the 1650s was the one period most likely to keep him contented—provided Miss Van Tromp didn't turn out to be a nuisance. So he took careful note of the set of his controls, jotting them down so that he would not be likely to forget them.

It was late when he found himself back in his own time.

His sister was waiting up for him. "Two o'clock in the morning!" she screamed at him. "What are you doing to me? Oh, God, why didn't I marry when I had the chance, instead of throwing away my life on a worthless brother!"

"Why don't you? It's not too late," he sighed wearily.

"How can you say that?" she

snapped bitterly. "Here I am thirty nearly, and worn out from working for you. Who would marry me now? Oh, if only I could have another chance! If I could be young again, and do it all over, I'd know how to have a better life!"

In spite of his boredom with her, Vanderkamp felt the effect of this cry from a lonely heart. He looked at her pityingly; it was true, after all, that she had worked faithfully for him, without pay, since their parents died. "Take a look at this," he said gently, offering her the bowl.

"Hah! Can we eat bowls?"

He raised his eyes heavenward and went wearily to bed.

"I saw Vanderkamp again about a fortnight later," Harrigan went on. "Ran into him in a tavern on the Bowery. He recognized me and came over.

"That was some story you did," he said.

"Been bothered by cranks?" I asked.

"Hell, yes! Not too badly, though. They want to ride off somewhere just to get away. I get that feeling myself sometimes. But, tell me, have you seen the morning papers?"

"Now, by coincidence, the papers that morning had carried a story from some local nuclear physicist about the increasing probability that the atom would be smashed. I told him I'd seen it.

"What did I tell you?" he said.

"I just smiled and asked where he'd been lately. He didn't hesitate to talk, perhaps because his sister had been giving him a hard time with her nagging. So I listened. It appeared, to hear him tell it, that he had been off visiting the Dutch in New Amsterdam. You could almost believe what he said, listening to him, except for that wild look he had. Anyway, he'd been in New Amsterdam about 1650, and he'd brought back a few trifling souvenirs of the trips. Would I like to see them? I said I would.

"I figured he'd got his hands on some nice antiques and wanted an appreciative audience. His sister wasn't home; so he took me around and showed me his pieces, one by one—a bowl, a pair of wooden candlesticks, wooden shoes, and more, all in all a fine collection. He even had a chair that looked pretty authentic, and I wondered where he'd dug up so many nice things of the New Amsterdam period—though, of course, I had to take his word as to where they belonged historically; I didn't know. But I imagine he got them somewhere in the city or perhaps up in the Catskill country.

"Well, after a while I got another look at his contraption. It didn't appear to have been moved at all; it was still sitting where it had been before, without a sign to say that it had been used to go anywhere, least of all into past time.

"Tell me," I said to him at last, 'when you go back in time do you get younger?'

"Yes and no," he said. 'Obviously.'

"It wasn't obvious to me, but I couldn't get any more than that out of him. The thing I couldn't figure out was the reason for his claim. He wasn't trying to sell anything to anybody, as far as I could see; he wasn't anxious to tell the world about his time-machine, either. He didn't mind talking in his oblique fashion about his trips. He did talk about New Amsterdam as if he had a pretty good acquaintance with the place. But then, he was known as a minor authority on the customs of the Dutch colony.

"He was touched, obviously. Just the same, he challenged me, in a way. I wanted to know something more about him, how his machine worked, how he took off, and so on. I made up my mind the next time I was in the neighborhood to look him up, hoping he wouldn't be home.

"When I made it, his sister was alone, and in fine fettle, as cantankerous as a flea-bitten mastiff.

"He's gone again," she complained bitterly.

"Clearly the two of them were at odds. I asked her whether she had seen him go. She hadn't; he had just marched out to his shop and that was an end to him as far as she was concerned.

"I haggled around quite a lot and finally got her permission to go out and see what I could see for myself. Of course, the shop was locked. I had counted on that and had brought along a handy little skeleton key. I was inside in no time. The machine wasn't there. Not a sign of it, or of Vanderkamp either.

Now, I looked around all over, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out how he could have taken it out of that place; it was too big for doors or windows, and the walls and roof were solid and immovable. I figured that he couldn't have got such a large machine away without his sister's seeing him; so I locked the place up and went back to the house.

"But she was immovable; she hadn't seen a thing. If he had taken anything larger than pocket-size out of that shop of his, she had missed it. I could hardly doubt her sincerity. There was nothing to be had from that source; so I had no alternative but to wait for him another time."

Anna Van Tromp, considerably chastened, watched her strange suitor—she looked upon all men as suitors, without exception; for so her father had conditioned her to do—as he reached into his sack and brought out another wonder.

"Now this," said Vanderkamp, "is an alarm clock. You wind it up like

this, you see; set it, and off it goes. Listen to it ring! That will wake you up in the morning."

"More magic," she cried doubtfully.

"No, no," he explained patiently. "It is an everyday thing in my country. Perhaps some day you would like to join me in a little visit there, Anna?"

"Ja, maybe," she agreed, looking out the window to his weird and frightening carriage, which had no animal to draw it and which vanished so strangely, fading away into the air, whenever Vanderkamp went into it. "This clothes-washing machine you talk about," she admitted. "This I would like to see."

"I must go now," said Vanderkamp, gazing at her with well-simulated coyness. "I'll leave these things here with you, and I'll just take along that bench over there."

"Ja, ja," said Anna, blushing.

"Six of one and half a dozen of the other," muttered Vanderkamp, comparing Anna with his sister.

He got into his time-machine and set out for home in the twentieth century. There was some reluctance in his going. Here all was somnolent peace and quiet, despite the rigors of living; in his own time there were wars and turmoil and the ultimate threat of the greatest war of all. New Amsterdam had one drawback, however—the presence of Anna Von Tromp. She had grown fond of him, undeniably,

perhaps because he was so much more interested in her circumstances than in herself. What was a man to do? Julie at one end, Anna at the other. But even getting rid of Julie would not allow him to escape the warfare to come.

He thought deeply of his problem all the way home.

When he got back, he found his sister waiting up, as usual, ready to deliver the customary diatribe.

He forestalled her. "I've been thinking things over, Julie. I believe you'd be much happier if you were living with brother Carl. I'll give you as much money as you need, and you can pack your things and I'll take you down to Louisiana."

"Take me!" she exclaimed. "How? In that crazy contraption of yours?"

"Precisely."

"Oh no!" she said. "You don't get me into that machine! How do I know what it will do to me? It's a time machine, isn't it? It might make an old hag of me—or a baby!"

"You said that you wanted to be young again, didn't you?" he said softly. "You said you'd like another chance . . ."

A faraway look came into her eyes. "Oh, if I only could! If I only could be a girl again, with a chance to get married . . ."

"Pack your things," Vanderkamp said quietly.

"It must have been all of a month

before I saw Vanderkamp again," Harrigan continued, waving for another scotch and soda. "I was down in the vicinity on an assignment and I took a run over to his place.

"He was home this time. He came to the door, which he had chained on the inside. He recognized me, and it was plain at the same time that he had no intention of letting me in.

"I came right out with the first question I had in mind. 'The thing that bothers me,' I said to him, 'is how you get that time machine of yours in and out of that shed.'

"'Mr. Harrigan,' he answered, 'newspaper reporters ought to have at least elementary scientific knowledge. You don't. How in hell could even a time machine be in two places at once, I ask you? If I take that machine back three centuries, that's where it is—not here. And three centuries ago that shop wasn't standing there. So you don't go in or out; you don't move at all, remember? It's time that moves.'

"'I called the other day,' I went on. 'Your sister spoke to me. Give her my regards.'

"'My sister's left me,' he said shortly, 'to stew, as you might say, in my own time machine.'

"'Really?' I said. 'Just what do you have in mind to do next?'

"'Let me ask you something, Mr. Harrigan,' he answered. 'Would you sit around here waiting for an atomic war if you could get away?'

"'Certainly not,' I answered.

"'Well, then, I don't intend to, either.'

"All this while he was standing at the door, refusing to open it any wider or to let me in. He was making it pretty plain that there wasn't much he had to say to me. And he seemed to be in a hurry.

"'Remember me to the inquiring public thirty years hence, Mr. Harrigan,' he said at last, and closed the door.

"That was the last I saw of him."

Harrigan finished his scotch and soda appreciatively and looked around for the bartender.

"Did he take off then?" I asked.

"Like a rocket," said Harrigan. "Queerest thing was that there wasn't a trace of him. The machine was gone, too—the same way as the last time, without a disturbance in the shop. He and his machine had simply vanished off the face of the earth and were never heard from again.

"Matter of fact, though," Harrigan went on thoughtfully, "Vanderkamp's disappearance wasn't the really queer angle on the pitch. The other thing broke in the papers the week after he left. The neighbors got pretty worked up about it. They called the police to tell them that Vanderkamp's sister Julie was back, only she was off her nut—and a good deal changed in appearance, too.

"Gal going blarney was no news, of course, but that last bit about

her appearance—they said she looked about twenty years older, all of a sudden—sort of rang a bell. So I went over there. It was Julie, all right; at least, she looked a hell of a lot like Julie had when I last saw her—provided you could grant that a woman could age twenty years in the few weeks it had been. And she was off her rocker, sure enough—or hysterical. Or at least madder than a wet hen. She made out like she couldn't speak a word of English, and they finally had to get an interpreter to understand her. She wouldn't speak anything but Dutch—and an old-fashioned kind, too.

"She made a lot of extravagant claims and kept insisting that she would bring the whole matter up in a complaint before Governor Stuyvesant. Said she wasn't Julie Vanderkamp, by God, but was named Anna Van Tromp—which is an old Dutch name thereabouts—and claimed that she had been abducted from her home on the Bowery. We pointed out the Third Avenue El and told her *that* was the Bowery, but she just sniffed and looked at us as though *we* were crazy."

I toyed with my drink. "You mean you actually listened to the poor girl's story?" I asked.

"Sure," Harrigan said. "Maybe she was as crazy as a bedbug, but I've listened to whackier stories from supposedly sane people. Sure, I listened to her." He paused

thoughtfully for a moment, then went on.

"She claimed that this fellow Vanderkamp had come to her house and filled her with a lot of guff about the wonderful country he lived in, and how she ought to let him take her to see it. Apparently he waxed especially eloquent about an automatic washing-machine and dryer, and that had fascinated her, for some reason. Then, she said, he'd brought a ten-year-old girl along—though where in the world old Vanderkamp could have picked up a tot like that is beyond me—and the kid had added her blandishments to the plot. Between them, they had managed to lure her into the old guy's machine. From what she said, it was obviously the time machine she was talking about, and if she was Julie there was no reason why she shouldn't know about it. But she talked as though it was a complete mystery to her, as though she'd no idea what the purpose of it was. Well, anyway, here she was—and very unhappy, too. Wanted to go back to old New Amsterdam, but bad.

"It was a beautiful act, even if she was nuts. The strange thing was, though, that there were some things even a gal going whacky couldn't explain. For instance, the house was filled with what the experts said were priceless antiques from Dutch New Amsterdam, of the period just prior to the British siege. You'd

think those things would make poor Julie feel more at home, seeing as she claimed to belong in that period, but apparently they just made her homesick. And, curiously enough, all the modern gadgets were gone. All those handy little items that make the twentieth century so livable had been taken away—including the washing-machine and dryer, by the way. Julie—or Anna, as she called herself—claimed that Vanderkamp had taken it back with him, wherever he'd gone to, after he'd brought her there."

"Poor woman," I said sympathetically. "They toted her off to the booby hatch, I suppose."

"No . . ." Harrigan said slowly. "They didn't, as a matter of fact. Since she was harmless, they let her stay in the house a while. Which was a mistake, it seems. Of course, she *wasn't* from the seventeenth century. That's impossible. All the same—." He broke off abruptly and stared moodily into his glass.

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"She was found one morning about two weeks after she got there," he said. "Dead. Electrocuted. It seems she'd stuck her finger into a light socket while standing in a bathtub full of water. An accident, obviously. As the Medical Examiner said, it was an accident any six-year-old child would have known enough about electricity to avoid.

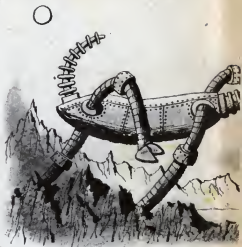
"That is," Harrigan added, "a *twentieth-century* child . . ." • • •

REDDISH - YELLOW SUNLIGHT filtered through the thick quartz windows into the sleep-compartment. Tony Rossi yawned, stirred a little, then opened his black eyes and sat up quickly. With one motion he tossed the covers back and slid to the warm metal floor. He clicked off his alarm clock and hurried to the closet.

It looked like a nice day. The landscape outside was motionless, undisturbed by winds or dust-shift. The boy's heart pounded excitedly. He pulled his trousers on, zipped up the reinforced mesh, struggled into his heavy canvas shirt, and then sat down on the edge of the cot to tug on his boots. He closed the seams around their tops and then did the same with his gloves. Next he adjusted the pressure on his pump unit and strapped it between his shoulder blades. He grabbed his helmet from the dresser, and he was ready for the day.

In the dining-compartment his mother and father had finished breakfast. Their voices drifted to him as he clattered down the ramp. A disturbed murmur; he paused to listen. What were they talking about? Had he done something wrong, again?

And then he caught it. Behind their voices was another voice. Static and crackling pops. The all-system audio signal from Rigel IV. They had it turned up full blast; the dull thunder of the monitor's

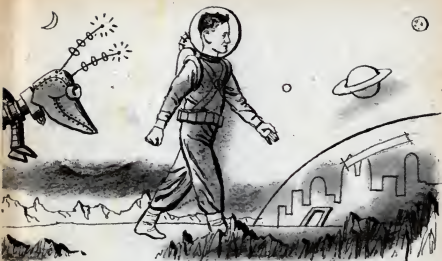


A TEN-YEAR-OLD BOY GROWS

voice boomed loudly. The war. Always the war. He sighed, and stepped out into the dining-compartment.

"Morning," his father muttered.

"Good morning, dear," his mother said absently. She sat with her head turned to one side, wrinkles of concentration webbing her forehead. Her thin lips were drawn together in a tight line of concern. His father had pushed his dirty dishes back and was smoking, elbows on the table, dark hairy arms bare and muscular. He was scowling, intent on the jumbled roar from the speaker above the sink.



UP FAST WHEN HISTORY CATCHES UP WITH THE HUMAN RACE.

"How's it going?" Tony asked. He slid into his chair and reached automatically for the ersatz grapefruit. "Any news from Orion?"

Neither of them answered. They didn't hear him. He began to eat his grapefruit. Outside, beyond the little metal and plastic housing unit, sounds of activity grew. Shouts and muffled crashes, as rural merchants and their trucks rumbled along the highway toward Karnet. The reddish daylight swelled; Betelgeuse was rising quietly and majestically.

"Nice day," Tony said. "No flux wind. I think I'll go down to the n-quarter awhile. We're building a

TONY and the BEETLES

by Philip K. Dick

neat spaceport, a model, of course, but we've been able to get enough materials to lay out strips for—"

With a savage snarl his father reached out and struck the audio roar immediately died. "I knew it!" He got up and moved angrily away from the table. "I told them it would happen. They shouldn't have moved so soon. Should have built up Class A supply bases, first."

"Isn't our main fleet moving in from Bellatrix?" Tony's mother fluttered anxiously. "According to last night's summary the worst that can happen is Orion IX and X will be dumped."

Joseph Rossi laughed harshly. "The hell with last night's summary. They know as well as I do what's happening."

"What's happening?" Tony echoed, as he pushed aside his grapefruit and began to ladle out dry cereal. "Are we losing the battle?"

"Yes!" His father's lips twisted. "Earthmen, losing to—to *beetles*. I told them. But they couldn't wait. My God, there's ten good years left in this system. Why'd they have to push on? Everybody knew Orion would be tough. The whole damn beetle fleet's strung out around there. Waiting for us. And we have to barge right in."

"But nobody ever thought beetles would fight," Leah Rossi protested mildly. "Everybody thought they'd just fire a few blasts and then—"

"They *have* to fight! Orion's the last jump-off. If they don't fight here, where the hell can they fight?" Rossi swore savagely. "Of course they're fighting. We have all their planets except the inner Orion string—not that they're worth much, but it's the principle of the thing. If we'd built up strong supply bases, we could have broken up the beetle fleet and really clobbered it."

"Don't say 'beetle,'" Tony murmured, as he finished his cereal. "They're Pac-udeti, same as here. The word 'beetle' comes from Betelgeuse. An Arabian word we invented ourselves."

Joe Rossi's mouth opened and closed. "What are you, a goddamn beetle-lover?"

"Joe," Leah snapped. "For heaven's sake."

Rossi moved toward the door. "If I was ten years younger I'd be out there. I'd really show those shiny-shelled insects what the hell they're up against. Them and their junky beat-up old hulks. Converted freighters!" His eyes blazed. "When I think of them shooting down Teran cruisers with *our* boys in them—"

"Orion's their system," Tony murmured.

"*Their* system! When the hell did you get to be an authority on space law? Why, I ought to—" He broke off, choked with rage. "My own kid," he muttered. "One more crack out of you today and I'll hang one

on you you'll feel the rest of the week."

Tony pushed his chair back. "I won't be around here today. I'm going into Karnet, with my EEP."

"Yeah, to play with beetles!"

Tony said nothing. He was already sliding his helmet in place and snapping the clamps tight. As he pushed through the back door, into the lock membrane, he unscrewed his oxygen tap and set the tank filter into action. An automatic response, conditioned by a lifetime spent on a colony planet in an alien system.

A faint flux wind caught at him and swept yellow-red dust around his boots. Sunlight glittered from the metal roof of his family's housing unit, one of endless rows of squat boxes set in the sandy slope, protected by the line of ore-refining installations against the horizon. He made an impatient signal, and from the storage shed his EEP came gliding out, catching the sunlight on its chrome trim.

"We're going down into Karnet," Tony said, unconsciously slipping into the Pas dialect. "Hurry up!"

The EEP took up its position behind him, and he started briskly down the slope, over the shifting sand, toward the road. There were quite a few traders out, today. It was a good day for the market; only a fourth of the year was fit for travel. Betelgeuse was an erratic

and undependable sun, not at all like Sol (according to the edutapes, fed to Tony four hours a day, six days a week—he had never seen Sol himself).

He reached the noisy road. Pas-udeti were everywhere. Whole groups of them, with their primitive combustion-driven trucks, battered and filthy, motors grinding protestingly. He waved at the trucks as they pushed past him. After a moment one slowed down. It was piled with *sis*, bundled heaps of gray vegetables dried, and prepared for the table. A staple of the Pas-udeti diet. Behind the wheel lounged a dark-faced elderly Pas, one arm over the open window, a rolled leaf between his lips. He was like all other Pas-udeti; lank and hard-shelled, encased in a brittle sheath in which he lived and died.

"You want a ride?" the Pas murmured—required protocol when an Earthman on foot was encountered.

"Is there room for my EEP?"

The Pas made a careless motion with his claw. "It can run behind." Sardonic amusement touched his ugly old face. "If it gets to Karnet we'll sell it for scrap. We can use a few condensers and relay tubing. We're short on electronic maintenance stuff."

"I know," Tony said solemnly, as he climbed into the cabin of the truck. "It's all been sent to the big repair base at Orion I. For your war-fleet."

Amusement vanished from the leathery face. "Yes, the warfleet." He turned away and started up the truck again. In the back, Tony's EEP had scrambled up on the load of *tis* and was gripping precariously with its magnetic lines.

Tony noticed the Pas-udeti's sudden change of expression, and he was puzzled. He started to speak to him—but now he noticed unusual quietness among the other Pas, in the other trucks, behind and in front of his own. The war, of course. It had swept through this system a century ago; these people had been left behind. Now all eyes were on Orion, on the battle between the Terran warfleet and the Pas-udeti collection of armed freighters.

"Is it true," Tony asked carefully, "that you're winning?"

The elderly Pas grunted. "We hear rumors."

Tony considered. "My father says Terra went ahead too fast. He says we should have consolidated. We didn't assemble adequate supply bases. He used to be an officer, when he was younger. He was with the fleet for two years."

The Pas was silent a moment. "It's true," he said at last, "that when you're so far from home, supply is a great problem. We, on the other hand, don't have that. We have no distances to cover."

"Do you know anybody fighting?"

"I have distant relatives." The

answer was vague; the Pas obviously didn't want to talk about it.

"Have you ever seen your warfleet?"

"Not as it exists now. When this system was defeated most of our units were wiped out. Remnants limped to Orion and joined the Orion fleet."

"Your relatives were with the remnants?"

"That's right."

"Then you were alive when this planet was taken?"

"Why do you ask?" The old Pas quivered violently. "What business is it of yours?"

Tony leaned out and watched the walls and buildings of Karnet grow ahead of them. Karnet was an old city. It had stood thousands of years. The Pas-udeti civilization was stable; it had reached a certain point of technocratic development and then leveled off. The Pas had inter-system ships that had carried people and freight between planets in the days before the Terran Confederation. They had combustion-driven cars, audiophones, a power network of a magnetic type. Their plumbing was satisfactory and their medicine was highly advanced. They had art forms, emotional and exciting. They had a vague religion.

"Who do you think will win the battle?" Tony asked.

"I don't know." With a sudden jerk the old Pas brought the truck to a crashing halt. "This is as far

as I go. Please get out and take your EEP with you."

Tony faltered in surprise. "But aren't you going—?"

"No farther!"

Tony pushed the door open. He was vaguely uneasy; there was a hard, fixed expression on the leathery face, and the old creature's voice had a sharp edge he had never heard before. "Thanks," he murmured. He hopped down into the red dust and signaled his EEP. It released its magnetic lines, and instantly the truck started up with a roar, passing on inside the city.

Tony watched it go, still dazed. The hot dust lapped at his ankles; he automatically moved his feet and slapped at his trousers. A truck honked, and his EEP quickly moved him from the road, up to the level pedestrian ramp. Pas-udeti in swarms moved by, endless lines of rural people hurrying into Karnet on their daily business. A massive public bus had stopped by the gate and was letting off passengers. Male and female Pas. And children. They laughed and shouted; the sounds of their voices blended with the low hum of the city.

"Going in?" a sharp Pas-udeti voice sounded close behind him. "Keep moving—you're blocking the ramp."

It was a young female, with a heavy armload clutched in her claws. Tony felt embarrassed; female Pas had a certain telepathic

ability, part of their sexual make-up. It was effective on Earthmen at close range.

"Here," she said. "Give me a hand."

Tony nodded his head, and the EEP accepted the female's heavy armload. "I'm visiting the city," Tony said, as they moved with the crowd toward the gates. "I got a ride most of the way, but the driver let me off out here."

"You're from the settlement?"

"Yes."

She eyed him critically. "You've always lived here, haven't you?"

"I was born here. My family came here from Earth four years before I was born. My father was an officer in the fleet. He earned an Emigration Priority."

"So you've never seen your own planet. How old are you?"

"Ten years. Terran."

"You shouldn't have asked the driver so many questions."

They passed through the decontamination shield and into the city. An information square loomed ahead; Pas men and women were packed around it. Moving chutes and transport cars rumbled everywhere. Buildings and ramps and open-air machinery; the city was sealed in a protective dust-proof envelope. Tony unfastened his helmet and clipped it to his belt. The air was stale-smelling, artificial, but usable.

"Let me tell you something," the

young female said carefully, as she strode along the foot-ramp beside Tony. "I wonder if this is a good day for you to come into Karnet. I know you've been coming here regularly to play with your friends. But perhaps today you ought to stay at home, in your settlement."

"Why?"

"Because today everybody is upset."

"I know," Tony said. "My mother and father were upset. They were listening to the news from our base in the Rigel system."

"I don't mean your family. Other people are listening, too. These people here. My race."

"They're upset, all right," Tony admitted. "But I come here all the time. There's nobody to play with at the settlement, and anyhow we're working on a project."

"A model spaceport."

"That's right." Tony was envious. "I sure wish I was a telepath. It must be fun."

The female Pas-udeti was silent. She was deep in thought. "What would happen," she asked, "if your family left here and returned to Earth?"

"That couldn't happen. There's no room for us on Earth. C-bombs destroyed most of Asia and North America back in the Twentieth Century."

"Suppose you *had* to go back?"

Tony did not understand. "But we can't. Habitable portions of

Earth are overcrowded. Our main problem is finding places for Terrans to live, in other systems." He added, "And anyhow, I don't particularly want to go to Terra. I'm used to it here. All my friends are here."

"I'll take my packages," the female said. "I go this other way, down this third-level ramp."

Tony nodded to his EEP and it lowered the bundles into the female's claws. She lingered a moment, trying to find the right words.

"Good luck," she said.

"With what?"

She smiled faintly, ironically. "With your model spaceport. I hope you and your friends get to finish it."

"Of course we'll finish it," Tony said, surprised. "It's almost done." What did she mean?

The Pas-udeti woman hurried off before he could ask her. Tony was troubled and uncertain; more doubts filled him. After a moment he headed slowly into the lane that took him toward the residential section of the city. Past the stores and factories, to the place where his friends lived.

The group of Pas-udeti children eyed him silently as he approached. They had been playing in the shade of an immense *bengelo*, whose ancient branches drooped and swayed with the air currents pumped through the city. Now they sat unmoving.

"I didn't expect you today,"

B'prith said, in an expressionless voice.

Tony halted awkwardly, and his EEP did the same. "How are things?" he murmured.

"Fine."

"I got a ride part way."

"Fine."

Tony squatted down in the shade. None of the Pas children stirred. They were small, not as large as Terran children. Their shells had not hardened, had not turned dark and opaque, like horn. It gave them a soft, unformed appearance, but at the same time it lightened their load. They moved more easily than their elders; they could hop and skip around, still. But they were not skipping right now.

"What's the matter?" Tony demanded. "What's wrong with everybody?"

No one answered.

"Where's the model?" he asked. "Have you fellows been working on it?"

After a moment Llyre nodded slightly.

Tony felt dull anger rise up inside him. "Say something! What's the matter? What're you all mad about?"

"Mad?" B'prith echoed. "We're not mad."

Tony scratched aimlessly in the dust. He knew what it was. The war, again. The battle going on near Orion. His anger burst up wildly. "Forget the war. Everything was

fine yesterday, before the battle."

"Sure," Llyre said. "It was fine."

Tony caught the edge to his voice. "It happened a hundred years ago. It's not my fault."

"Sure," B'prith said.

"This is my home. Isn't it? Haven't I got as much right here as anybody else? I was born here."

"Sure," Llyre said, tonelessly.

Tony appealed to them helplessly. "Do you have to act this way? You didn't act this way yesterday. I was here yesterday—all of us were here yesterday. What's happened since yesterday?"

"The battle," B'prith said.

"What difference does *that* make? Why does that change everything? There's always war. There've been battles all the time, as long as I can remember. What's different about this?"

B'prith broke apart a clump of dirt with his strong claws. After a moment he tossed it away and got slowly to his feet. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "according to our audio relay, it looks as if our fleet is going to win, this time."

"Yes," Tony agreed, not understanding. "My father says we didn't build up adequate supply bases. We'll probably have to fall back to . . ." And then the impact hit him. "You mean, for the first time in a hundred years—"

"Yes," Llyre said, also getting up. The others got up, too. They moved away from Tony, toward the near-

by house. "We're winning. The Terran flank was turned, half an hour ago. Your right wing has folded completely."

Tony was stunned. "And it matters. It matters to all of you."

"Matters!" B'prith halted, suddenly blazing out in fury. "Sure it matters! For the first time—in a century. The first time in our lives we're beating you. We have you on the run, you—" He choked out the word, almost spat it out. "You white-grubs!"

They disappeared into the house. Tony sat gazing stupidly down at the ground, his hands still moving aimlessly. He had heard the word before, seen it scrawled on walls and in the dust near the settlement. *White-grubs*. The Pas term of derision for Terrans. Because of their softness, their whiteness. Lack of hard shells. Pulpy, doughy skin. But they had never dared say it out loud, before. To an Earthman's face.

Beside him, his EEP stirred restlessly. Its intricate radio mechanism sensed the hostile atmosphere. Automatic relays were sliding into place; circuits were opening and closing.

"It's all right," Tony murmured, getting slowly up. "Maybe we'd better go back."

He moved unsteadily toward the ramp, completely shaken. The EEP walked calmly ahead, its metal face blank and confident, feeling nothing, saying nothing. Tony's

thoughts were a wild turmoil; he shook his head, but the crazy spinning kept up. He couldn't make his mind slow down, lock in place.

"Wait a minute," a voice said. B'prith's voice, from the open doorway. Cold and withdrawn, almost unfamiliar.

"What do you want?"

B'prith came toward him, claws behind his back in the formal Pasudeti posture, used between total strangers. "You shouldn't have come here, today."

"I know," Tony said.

B'prith got out a bit of *tis* stalk and began to roll it into a tube. He pretended to concentrate on it. "Look," he said. "You said you have a right here. But you don't."

"I—" Tony murmured.

"Do you understand why not? You said it isn't your fault. I guess not. But it's not my fault, either. Maybe it's nobody's fault. I've known you a long time."

"Five years. Terran."

B'prith twisted the stalk up and tossed it away. "Yesterday we played together. We worked on the spaceport. But we can't play today. My family said to tell you not to come here any more." He hesitated, and did not look Tony in the face. "I was going to tell you, anyhow. Before they said anything."

"Oh," Tony said.

"Everything that's happened today—the battle, our fleet's stand. We didn't know. We didn't dare hope.

You see? A century of running. First this system. Then the Rigel system, all the planets. Then the other Orion stars. We fought here and there—scattered fights. Those that got away joined up. We supplied the base at Orion—you people didn't know. But there was no hope; at least, nobody thought there was." He was silent a moment. "Funny," he said, "what happens when your back's to the wall, and there isn't any further place to go. Then you have to fight."

"If our supply bases—" Tony began thickly, but B'prith cut him off savagely.

"Your supply bases! Don't you understand? We're beating you! Now you'll have to get out! All you white-grubs. Out of our system!"

Tony's EEP moved forward ominously. B'prith saw it. He bent down, snatched up a rock, and hurled it straight at the EEP. The rock clanged off the metal hull and bounced harmlessly away. B'prith snatched up another rock. Llyre and the others came quickly out of the house. An adult Pas loomed up behind them. Everything was happening too fast. More rocks crashed against the EEP. One struck Tony on the arm.

"Get out!" B'prith screamed. "Don't come back! This is our planet!" His claws snatched at Tony. "We'll tear you to pieces if you—"

Tony smashed him in the chest. The soft shell gave like rubber,

and the Pas stumbled back. He wobbled and fell over, gasping and screeching.

"Beetle," Tony breathed hoarsely. Suddenly he was terrified. A crowd of Pas-udeti was forming rapidly. They surged on all sides, hostile faces, dark and angry, a rising thunder of rage.

More stones showered. Some struck the EEP, others fell around Tony, near his boots. One whizzed past his face. Quickly he slid his helmet in place. He was scared. He knew his EEP's E-signal had already gone out, but it would be minutes before a ship could come. Besides, there were other Earthmen in the city to be taken care of; there were Earthmen all over the planet. In all the cities. On all the twenty-three Betelgeuse planets. On the fourteen Rigel planets. On the other Orion planets.

"We have to get out of here," he muttered to the EEP. "Do something!"

A stone hit him on the helmet. The plastic cracked; air leaked out, and then the autoseal filmed over. More stones were falling. The Pas swarmed close, a yelling, seething mass of black-sheathed creatures. He could smell them, the acrid body-odor of insects, hear their claws snap, feel their weight.

The EEP threw its heat beam on. The beam shifted in a wide band toward the crowd of Pas-udeti. Crude hand weapons appeared. A

clatter of bullets burst around Tony; they were firing at the EEP. He was dimly aware of the metal body beside him. A shuddering crash—the EEP was toppled over. The crowd poured over it; the metal hull was lost from sight.

Like a demented animal, the crowd tore at the struggling EEP. A few of them smashed in its head; others tore off struts and shiny arm-sections. The EEP ceased struggling. The crowd moved away, panting and clutching jagged remains. They saw Tony.

As the first line of them reached for him, the protective envelope high above them shattered. A Terran scout ship thundered down, heat beam screaming. The crowd scattered in confusion, some firing, some throwing stones, others leaping for safety.

Tony picked himself up and made his way unsteadily toward the spot where the scout was landing.

"I'm sorry," Joe Rossi said gently. He touched his son on the shoulder. "I shouldn't have let you go down there today. I should have known."

Tony sat hunched over in the big plastic easychair. He rocked back and forth, face pale with shock. The scout ship which had rescued him had immediately headed back toward Karnet; there were other Earthmen to bring out, besides this first load. The boy said nothing. His

mind was blank. He still heard the roar of the crowd, felt its hate—a century of pent-up fury and resentment. The memory drove out everything else; it was all around him, even now. And the sight of the floundering EEP, the metallic ripping sound, as its arms and legs were torn off and carried away.

His mother dabbed at his cuts and scratches with antiseptic. Joe Rossi shakily lit a cigarette and said, "If your EEP hadn't been along they'd have killed you. Beetles." He shuddered. "I never should have let you go down there. All this time . . . They might have done it any time, any day. Knifed you. Cut you open with their filthy goddamn claws."

Below the settlement the reddish-yellow sunlight glinted on gunbarrels. Already, dull booms echoed against the crumbling hills. The defense ring was going into action. Black shapes darted and scurried up the side of the slope. Black patches moved out from Karnet, toward the Terran settlement, across the dividing line the Confederation surveyors had set up a century ago. Karnet was a bubbling pot of activity. The whole city rumbled with feverish excitement.

Tony raised his head. "They—they turned our flank."

"Yeah." Joe Rossi stubbed out his cigarette. "They sure did. That was at one o'clock. At two they drove a wedge right through the center of our line. Split the fleet in

half. Broke it up—sent it running. Picked us off one by one as we fell back. Christ, they're like maniacs. Now that they've got the scent, the taste of our blood."

"But it's getting better," Leah fluttered. "Our main fleet units are beginning to appear."

"We'll get them," Joe muttered. "It'll take a while. But by God we'll wipe them out. Every last one of them. If it takes a thousand years. We'll follow every last ship down—we'll get them all." His voice rose in frenzy. "Beetles! Goddamn insects! When I think of them, trying to hurt my kid, with their filthy black claws—"

"If you were younger, you'd be in the line," Leah said. "It's not your fault you're too old. The heart strain's too great. You did your job. They can't let an older person take chances. It's not your fault."

Joe clenched his fists. "I feel so—futile. If there was only something I could do."

"The fleet will take care of them," Leah said soothingly. "You said so yourself. They'll hunt every one of them down. Destroy them all. There's nothing to worry about."

Joe sagged miserably. "It's no use. Let's cut it out. Let's stop kidding ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"Face it! We're not going to win, not this time. We went too far. Our time's come."

There was silence.

Tony sat up a little. "When did you know?"

"I've known a long time."

"I found out today. I didn't understand, at first. This is—stolen ground. I was born here, but it's stolen ground."

"Yes. It's stolen. It doesn't belong to us."

"We're here because we're stronger. But now we're not stronger. We're being beaten."

"They know Terrans can be licked. Like anybody else." Joe Rossi's face was gray and flabby. "We took their planets away from them. Now they're taking them back. It'll be a while, of course. We'll retreat slowly. It'll be another five centuries going back. There're a lot of systems between here and Sol."

Tony shook his head, still uncomprehending. "Even Llyre and B'prith. All of them. Waiting for their time to come. For us to lose and go away again. Where we came from."

Joe Rossi paced back and forth. "Yeah, we'll be retreating from now on. Giving ground, instead of taking it. It'll be like this today—losing fights, draws. Stalemates and worse."

He raised his feverish eyes toward the ceiling of the little metal housing unit, face wild with passion and misery.

"But, by God, we'll give them a run for their money. All the way back! Every inch!"

• • •

PLACE of MEETING

IT SWEPT DOWN from the mountains, a loose crystal-smelling wind, an autumn chill of moving wetness. Down from the mountains and into the town where it set the dead trees hissing and the signboards creaking. And it even went into the church, because the bell was ringing and there was no one to ring the bell.

The people in the yard stopped their talk and listened to the rusty music.

Big Jim Kroner listened too. Then he cleared his throat and clapped his hands—thick hands, calloused and work-dirtied.

"All right," he said loudly. "All right, let's us settle down now." He walked out from the group and turned. "Who's got the list?"

"Got it right here, Jim," a woman said, coming forward with a loose-leaf folder.

"All present?"

"Everybody except that there German, Mr. Grunin—Grunger—"

Kroner smiled; he made a megaphone of his hands. "Grüninger—Barthold Grüninger?"

A small man with a mustache called out excitedly: "Ja, ja! . . . s'war schwer den Friedhof zu finden."



THEY MET IN THE NIGHT,
IN THE SHADOW OF
A SPIRE, FOR A PURPOSE
THAT CAN'T BE TOLD . . .

by Charles Beaumont



"All right. That's all we wanted to know, whether you was here or not." Kroner studied the pages carefully. Then he reached into the back pocket of his overalls and withdrew a stub of pencil and put the tip to his mouth.

"Now, before we start off," he said to the group, "I want to know is there anybody here that's got a question or anything to ask?" He looked over the crowd of silent faces. "Anybody don't know who I am? No? All right then."

It came another wind then, mountain-scattered and fast: it billowed dresses, set damp hair moving; it pushed over pewter vases and smashed dead roses and hydrangeas to swirling dust against the gritty tombstones. Its clean rain smell was gone now, though, for it had passed over the fields, and so it was filled with the odors of rotting life.

Kroner made a check mark in the notebook. "Anderson," he shouted, "Edward L."

A man in overalls like Kroner's stepped forward.

"Andy, you covered Skagit valley, Snohomish and King counties, as well as Seattle and the rest?"

"Yes, sir."

"What you got to report?"

"They're all dead," Anderson said.

"You looked everywhere? You was real careful?"

"Yes, sir. Ain't nobody alive in the whole state."

Kroner nodded and made another check mark. "That's all, Andy. Next: Avakian, Katina."

A woman in a wool skirt and grey blouse walked up from the back, waving her arms. She started to speak.

Kroner tapped his stick. "Listen here for a second, folks," he said. "For those that don't know how to talk English, you know what this is all about—so when I ask my question, you just nod up-and-down for yes (like this) and sideways (like this) for no. Makes it a lot easier for those of us as don't remember too good. All right?"

There were murmurings and whispered consultations and for a little while the yard was full of noise. The woman called Avakian kept nodding.

"Fine," Kroner said. "Now, Miss Avakian. You covered what? Ah . . . Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Did you—find—any-body a-live?"

The woman stopped nodding. "No," she said. "No, no."

Kroner checked the name. "Let's see here. Boleslavsky, Peter. You go on back, Miss Avakian."

A man in bright city clothes walked briskly to the tree clearing. "Yes, sir," he said.

"What have you got for us?"

The man shrugged. "Well, I tell you; I went over New York with a fine-tooth comb. Then I hit Brooklyn and Jersey. Nothin', man. Nothin' nowhere."

"He is right," a dark-faced woman said in a tremulous voice. "I was there too. Only the dead in the streets, all over, all over the city; in the cars I looked even, in the *offices*. Everywhere is people dead."

"Chavez, Pietro. Baja California."

"All dead, *senor chief*."

"Ciodo, Ruggiero. Capri."

The man from Capri shook his head violently.

"Denman, Charlotte. Southern United States."

"Dead as doornails . . ."

"Elgar, David S. . . ."

"Ferrazio, Ignatz . . ."

"Goldfarb, Bernard . . ."

"Halpern . . ."

"Kranek . . . O'Brian . . . Ives . . ."

The names exploded in the pale evening air like deep gunshots; there was much head-shaking, many people saying, "No. No."

At last Kroner stopped marking. He closed the notebook and spread his big workman's hands. He saw the round eyes, the trembling mouths, the young faces; he saw all the frightened people.

A girl began to cry. She sank to the damp ground and covered her face and made these crying sounds. An elderly man put his hand on her head. The elderly man looked sad. But not afraid. Only the young ones seemed afraid.

"Settle down now," Kroner said firmly. "Settle on down. Now, listen to me. I'm going to ask you all the same question one more time, be-

cause we got to be sure." He waited for them to grow quiet. "All right. This here is all of us, every one. We've covered all the spots. Did anybody here find one single solitary sign of life?"

The people were silent. The wind had died again, so there was no sound at all. Across the corroded wire fence the grey meadows lay strewn with the carcasses of cows and horses and, in one of the fields, sheep. No flies buzzed near the dead animals; there were no maggots burrowing. No vultures; the sky was clean of birds. And in all the untended rolling hills of grass and weeds which had once sung and pulsed with a million hidden voices, in all the land there was only this immense stillness now, still as years,¹¹ still as the unheard motion of the stars.

Kroner watched the people. The young woman in the gay print dress; the tall African with his bright paint and cultivated scars; the fierce-looking Swede looking not so fierce now in this greying twilight. He watched all the tall and short and old and young people from all over the world, pressed together now, a vast silent polyglot in this country meeting place, this always lonely and long-deserted spot—deserted even before the gas bombs and the disease and the flying pestilences that had covered the earth in three days and three nights. Deserted. Forgotten.

"Talk to us, Jim," the woman who had handed him the notebook said. She was new.

Kroner put the list inside his big overalls pocket.

"Tell us," someone else said. "How shall we be nourished? What will we do?"

"The world's all dead," a child moaned. "Dead as dead, the whole world . . ."

"Todo el mund—"

"Monsieur Kroner, Monsieur Kroner, what will we do?"

Kroner smiled. "Do?" He looked up through the still-hanging poison cloud, the dun blanket, up to where the moon was now risen in full coldness. His voice was steady, but it lacked life. "What some of us have done before," he said. "We'll go back and wait. It ain't the first time. It ain't the last."

A little fat bald man with old eyes sighed and began to waver in the October dusk. The outline of his form wavered and disappeared in the shadows under the trees where the moonlight did not reach. Others followed him as Kroner talked.

"Same thing we'll do again and likely keep on doing. We'll go back and—sleep. And we'll wait. Then it'll start all over again and folks'll build their cities—new folks with new blood—and then we'll wake up. Maybe a long time yet. But it ain't so bad; it's quiet, and time passes." He lifted a small girl of fifteen or sixteen with pale cheeks and red

lips. "Come on, now! Why, just think of the appetite you'll have all built up!"

The girl smiled. Kroner faced the crowd and waved his hands, large hands, rough from the stone of mid-night pyramids and the feel of muskets, boil-speckled from night-hours in packing plants and trucking lines; broken by the impact of a tomahawk and a machine-gun bullet; but white where the dirt was not caked, and bloodless. Old hands, old beyond years.

As he waved, the wind came limping back from the mountains. It blew the heavy iron bell high in the steepled white barn and set the signboards creaking and lifted ancient dusts and hissed again through the dead trees.

Kroner watched the air turn black. He listened to it fill with the flappings and the flutterings and the squeakings. He waited; then he stopped waving and sighed and began to walk.

He walked to a place of vines and heavy brush. Here he paused for a moment and looked out at the silent place of high dark grass, of hidden huddled tombs, of scrolls and stone-frozen children stained silver in the night's wet darkness; at the crosses he did not look. The people were gone; the place was empty.

Kroner kicked away the foliage. Then he got into the coffin and closed the lid.

Soon he was asleep. * * *

SCIENCE NOTES

As
reported
by
SCIENCE SERVICE

SPACE FLIGHT will create tricky survival problems, says Frederick H. Green of the AiResearch Manufacturing Co. Both men and machines that make interplanetary voyages will have to depend heavily upon air conditioning equipment. In no-gravity situations, hot air will not rise from a warm body or a machine. Unless the air is forcibly moved, both machine and man will falter. Furthermore, men confined in small cockpits eventually would be wrapped in a blanket of carbon dioxide which they exhaled. Unless the air is freed of this gas and replenished with life-sustaining oxygen, passengers will die.

Carbon dioxide probably will be removed chemically as on submarines, Mr. Green says. But other impurities such as methane and tobacco tars will be condensed at 200

degrees below zero and deposited. Oxygen probably will be replenished from liquid oxygen storage tanks, he predicts. Excessive humidity, or the severe lack of it, is another problem that space travelers must work out. Both men and machines are inefficient when the air gets too muggy or too dry.

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Cisterns 2,000 years old may be used by irrigation engineers to help reclaim the Negev desert area in Israel. Dr. W. C. Lowdermilk, American soil scientist, has said that technical experts can learn much from an irrigation system set up by the Nabataeans in the Negev area 2,000 years ago.

The cisterns have capacities up to 75,000 cubic feet and were used in ancient times to catch and store water during storms and flash

floods. The water was then doled out in the long dry season to irrigate crops. The experts now recommend that they be put to use again.

This tribe may have used mounds of flint rock fragments as dew mounds. The wind blowing between the flints would have deposited moisture on the stones, watering olive trees and vines planted in the mounds.

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Headlights, ten times more powerful than those of today, will be used on automobiles in the year 2003 without blinding glare to approaching drivers, predicts Val J. Roper, General Electric illuminating engineer.

The solution of the problem of more light with less glare will be polarized lenses and windshields, he says. The polarization to cut out the glare will be of the type that can be removed with the flick of a switch for daytime driving.

• •

A new method for figuring here on earth what goes on at the extremely high temperatures found in the sun and other stars has been outlined by Dr. I. Amdur of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

His method consists, not in trying to duplicate in the laboratory temperatures of the order of thousands of degrees, but in obtaining basic information concerning the properties of gases by scattering

beams of neutral particles with energies of 200 to 2,000 volts. The neutral-particle beam is scattered in a gas in much the same way that a flashlight beam is dispersed when it is shined into a murky solution. From the way the neutral particle beam is scattered, Dr. Amdur can calculate the desired gas properties.

Information on these properties can aid astronomers who are trying to find out if the universe is in a state of continual "creation," that is, with new stars being born out of cosmic dust all the time, since such cosmic dust is composed of gas particles. Dr. Amdur's data can also be used in calculating the rate at which the sun and other stars radiate energy into surrounding space.

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Cheerful news for the next hundred years or so: The world population in the year 2100 will be relatively stabilized at a level the earth can well support. There will be a steady improvement in living conditions and there will not be a growth of poverty along with the increase in people.

World population in the year 2000 will be 3,250,000,000, compared with 2,400,000,000 now. Twentieth Century Fund will shortly issue a study of world population and production by Dr. and Mrs. W. S. Woytinsky which is contrary to Malthus and other gloomy theorists.

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A big-city transit system was one

of inventions to get an official nod from the U. S. Patent Office recently. The system is designed to speed passengers through urban areas in a short time. It consists of a series of loops running up and down town and a series running crosstown. Trains, which may have as many as ten cars each, roar along these underground loops and are synchronized so that virtually no time is lost at transfer points.

Smaller loops within the big ones permit the passenger to switch from a crosstown train, for example, to a train running uptown. The trains on the small loops also are synchronized so that a minimum of time is lost in transfer. The system was invented by Henry A. Babcock of Glendale, Calif.

• •

A German whale-spotting device that beams "silent sound" into the water now is being used on 27 Norwegian whalers to help fishermen locate and startle whales nearly five miles away. The device emits short pulses of ultrasonic sounds to which the whales react.

• •

A "swindletron," a new kind of atom-smasher which cheats on an elementary law of physics, is being developed at the University of California. The law of physics says that in an atom-smasher only one boost of energy can be given to atomic projectiles by a single electrical impulse. The "swindletron" gives two

boosts of energy per electrical impulse.

The "swindletron" can operate in the region of several million electron volts, but cannot rival in energy the big cyclotrons, cosmotrons and bevatrons. However, scientists say it will operate cheaper, easier and more safely in the energy ranges now covered by Cockcroft-Walton and Van de Graaff atom-smashers.

In the Berkeley pilot model "swindletron," more formally called the charge exchange accelerator, protons, the nuclei of hydrogen atoms, are used as atomic bullets. The protons are shot at about 30,000 volts through a thin, uncharged sheet of aluminum. In this "capture" foil, the slow-moving protons tend to pick up two electrons each. Being negatively charged, the projectiles are then pulled violently toward another aluminum screen which is positively charged. The particles are boosted to 500,000 volts by this charge.

As they rush through this screen, the fast particles tend to lose their two electrons. So on leaving this "stripping" foil, the particles are once again naked protons with a positive charge. They are violently pushed away from the foil, receiving another 500,000 volt boost.

Thus, with a single 500,000 volt charge, the protons are accelerated to 1,000,000 volts. The physicists get twice as much energy out of the machine as they put in.



**SHE WAS JUST A
CRAZY BRAT—OR WAS SHE?**

Luna Escapade

by H. B. Fyfe

WITH OVER an hour to go before he needed to start braking for his landing on Luna, Pete Dudley sat at the controls of the rocket freighter and tried to think of anything else that needed check-

ing after his spinning the ship. He drummed absently with the fingers of his right hand upon the buckle of the seat strap which restrained him from floating out of the padded acceleration seat.

"Let's see, tail's right out there in front. I got the angle perfect. Guess everything's okay."

He noticed his fingers drumming, and stopped.

"Cut that out!" he told himself. "Get nervous now and Jack'll be sending some other vacuum on the next Mars run. There's Ericsson dead center in the screen, waiting for you to plop down beside the domes. You couldn't miss a crater that size if you tried."

He leaned back and stared speculatively at the curving tip of the Lunar Rockies that ended in one of the largest craters on the far side of Luna. His eyes squinted slightly and there was a crease between them, "as if he spent much time peering into instruments. There were deeper lines beside his mouth, but the thin lips and pointed chin neutralized that evidence of frequent smiling.

"Are we nearly there?"

Dudley's brown eyes opened so wide that the whites gleamed in the dim light from his instruments. Then he shut them tightly and shook his head quickly.

He had thought he heard a woman's voice, and of course he couldn't have. Freight rockets were

checked out of Terran spaceports with only a pilot aboard. A lonely job for a man, but it was really only a way of keeping in practice. He made six round trips to Luna a year, but the big one was the three-month kick to Mars.

Then he smelled the perfume, so out of place in the machine-crowded compartment. He turned around slowly.

She stood with one hand gripping the lead of a computing machine to keep her feet on the deck. Dudley stared her up and down two or three times before he realized his mouth hung open.

Slim and about five-feet-four, she looked like a nice little girl making her first disastrous experiments with adult make-up. The slack suit of deep blue, revealing a soft white blouse at the neck of the jacket, was in the best of taste, but her heavy application of lipstick was crude.

And her hair isn't naturally ash-blonde, Dudley thought. Yet she looks like such a kid. Not pretty, but she might be in a few years.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly.

For a second, her eyes were scared. Then the expression was supplanted by a hard, make-believe confidence, leaving him merely with a fading sense of shame at his tone.

"Same as you," she said boldly. "Going to Luna."

Dudley snorted. Then relax," he

growled, "because I can't stop you now. Where the devil did you spend the last thirty-six hours?"

She tried a grin. "In the little room where the things are that pump the air. I sneaked in the galley once, when you were asleep. Did you miss anything?"

"No," he admitted, thinking back.

"See? I'm not enough trouble to be noticed!"

Dudley eyed her sourly. There was trouble behind this somewhere, he was willing to bet, or else why had she stowed away? Running from a family fight? When the port checkers at Ericsson saw her—!

"How old are you, kid?" he asked.

"Twenty-one."

The answer was too pat and quickly given. Even the girl seemed to realize that, and she continued talking. "My name's Kathi Foster. You're the next Mars pilot, according to the schedule, aren't you?"

"What about it?"

She let go of the cable and pushed her weightless body across the control room to his chair.

"What's it like on Mars?" she asked breathlessly.

What does she expect me to tell her? Dudley wondered cynically. *That the whole population of the colony is only about four thousand? That they still live mostly on hope, dreams; and regular rocket service? That every one of them represents such a fantastic transportation ex-*

pense that the Commission only sends top-notch people?

"It's pretty tough," he said.

She hesitated over his unhelpful reply, then plunged ahead.

"How about taking me along to see for myself?"

Dudley smiled with one corner of his mouth.

"You're not going anywhere except back to Terra on the next rocket," he predicted flatly. "And I hope your father still has enough hair on his head to own a hair-brush!"

"My father is dead."

"Then your—." He paused as she shook her head. "Well, don't you have any family? Jobs on Luna are . . . limited. The settlements just aren't very big. You're better off down home."

Kathi's half-defiant, half-wheeling mask cracked. Her over-painted lips twitched.

"What do you know about where I'm better off? If you knew the kind of family I have—."

"Oh, calm down!" grunted Dudley, somewhat discomforted by the sight of tears spilling from her blue eyes. "Things are never as bad as you think when you're just a . . . when you're young. When we land, we can say you got left aboard by mistake. They'll just send you back without any trouble."

"Like hell they will! I won't go!"

Dudley stared hard at her, until she dropped her gaze.

"You don't understand," she said more quietly. "I . . . my family has been kicking me around the law courts all my life just because my grandfather left me his money. They're all trying to get their hands on it, or on me to back up their claims. Do you realize I'm eight—I'm twenty-one and I never lived a happy day in my life? I'd rather *die* than go back!"

"Yeah, sure," said Dudley. "What did you really do to make you so scared of going back? Smack up grandpop's helicopter, maybe, or flunk out of school?"

"No, I got sick and tired of being shoved around. I wanted to get away someplace where I could be myself."

"Why didn't you buy a ticket on a passenger rocket, if you had such an urge to visit Luna?"

"My aunts and uncles and cousins have all my money tied up in suits."

He leaned back by pushing the edge of the control desk.

"Pretty fast with the answers, aren't you?" he grinned. "I wonder what you'll think up for the space-port police when *they* ask you?"

"You don't believe—," she began.

He shook his head and to avoid further argument he picked up his sliderule, muttering something about checking his landing curve. Actually, he was not as convinced as he pretended that her story was all lies.

But what the hell? he thought. *I have my own troubles without worrying because some blonde little spiral thinks she can go dramatic over a family spat. She'd better learn that life is full of give and take.*

"You better get attached to something around here," he warned her when the time came for serious deceleration.

"I . . . I could go back where I was," she stammered. He suddenly realized that for the past hour she had silently accepted his ignoring her. She asked now, "What happens next?"

"We cut our speed and come down on the tail as near to the domes of the Ericsson settlement as possible without taking too much of a chance. Then I secure everything for the towing."

"Towing? I'm sorry; I never read much about the moon rockets."

"Natural enough," Dudley retorted dryly. "Anyway, they send out big cranes to lower the rocket to horizontal so they can tow it on wheels under one of the loading domes. Handling cargo goes a lot faster and safer that way. Most of the town itself is underground."

He began warming up his tele-screen prior to asking the spaceport for observation of his approach. Kathi grabbed his elbow.

"Of course I'm going to talk with them," he answered her startled question.

"Can they see me here behind you?"

"I guess so. Maybe not too clear, but they'll see somebody's with me. What's the difference? It'll just save them a shock later."

"Why should they see me at all? I can hide till after you leave the ship, and—."

"Fat chance!" grunted Dudley. "Forget it."

"Please, Dudley! I—I don't want to get you in any trouble, for one thing. At least, let me get out of sight now. Maybe you'll change your mind before we land."

He looked at her, and the anxiety seemed real enough. Knowing he was only letting her postpone the unpleasantness but reluctant to make her face it, he shrugged.

"All right, then! Go somewhere and wipe that stuff off your face. But stop dreaming!"

He waited until she had disappeared into one or another of the tiny compartments behind the control room, then sent out his call to the Lunar settlement.

The problem did not affect his landing; in fact, he did better than usual. His stubby but deft fingers lacked their ordinary tendency to tighten up, now that part of his mind was rehearsing the best way to explain the presence of an unauthorized passenger.

In the end, when he had the rocket parked neatly on the extremities of its fins less than a quarter of a

mile from one of the port domes, he had not yet made up his mind.

"Nice landing, Pete," the ground observer told him. "Buy you a drink later?"

"Uh . . . yeah, sure!" Dudley answered. "Say, is Jack Fisher anywhere around?"

"Jack? No, I guess he's gone bottom level. We're having 'night' just now, you know. Why? What do you want a cop for?"

Suddenly, it was too difficult.

If she could hide as long as she did, she could have done it all the way, he told himself.

"Oh, don't wake him up if he's asleep," he said hastily. "I just thought I'd have dinner with him sometime before I leave."

He waited sullenly while the great self-propelled machines glided out over the smooth floor of the crater toward the ship, despising himself for giving in.

Well, I just won't know anything about her, he decided. *Let her have her little fling on Luna! It won't last long.*

He closed the key that would guard against accidental activation of the controls and, enjoying the ability to walk even at one-sixth his normal weight, went about securing loose objects. When the space-suited figures outside signaled, he was ready for the tilt.

Once under the dome, he strode out through the airlock as if innocent of any thought but getting

breakfast. He exchanged greetings with some of the tow crew, turned over his manifesto to the yawning checker who met him, and headed for the entrance of the tunnel to the main part of the settlement.

Only when he had chosen a monorail car and started off along the tunnel toward the underground city a mile away did he let himself wonder about Kathi Foster.

"Her problem now," he muttered, but he felt a little sorry for her despite his view that she needed to grow up.

Later in the "day," he reported to transportation headquarters.

"Hiya, Pete!" grinned Les Snowdon, chief of the section. "All set for the Ruby Planet?"

Dudley grimaced. "I suppose so," he said. "Left my locker mostly packed, except for what I'll need for a couple of days. When do we go out and who's the crew?"

"Jarkowski, Campiglia, and Wells. You have three days to make merry and one to sober up."

"I sober fast," said Dudley.

Snowdon shook his head in mock admiration. "Nevertheless," he said, "the physical will be on the fourth morning from now. Don't get in any fights over on Level C—or if you do, let the girl do the punching for you! A broken finger, my boy, and you'll ruin the whole Martian schedule!"

"Ah, go on!" Dudley grinned, moving toward the door. "They

can always stick you in there, and make you earn your pay again."

"They're still paying me for the things I did in the old days," retorted Snowdon. "Until I get caught up, I'm satisfied to keep a little gravity under my butt. Oh . . . by the way, your pal Jack Fisher left a call for you. Something about dinner tonight."

Dudley thanked him and went off to contact Fisher. Then he returned to the pilots' quarters for a shower and strolled along the corridors of the underground city to a lunchroom. Food and water were rationed on Luna, but not nearly as tightly as they would be for him during the next three months.

That night, he joined Fisher and his wife for dinner at The View, Ericsson's chief center of escape from the drabness of Lunar life. It was the only restaurant, according

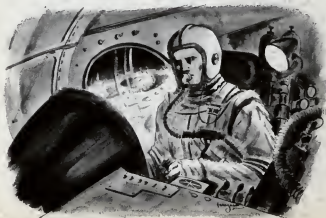
to the boast of its staff, where one could actually dine under the stars.

"Sometimes I wish that dome wasn't so transparent," said Fisher. "Sit down, the girls will be back in a minute."

Dudley eyed him affectionately. Fisher was head of the settlement's small police force, but managed to look more like the proprietor of one of the several bars that flourished in the levels of the city just under the restaurant. He was heavy enough to look less than his six feet, and his face was as square as the rest of him. Dark hair retreated reluctantly from his forehead, and the blue eyes set peering above his pudgy cheeks were shrewd.

"Girls?" asked Dudley.

"We brought along a new arrival to keep you company," said Fisher. "She works in one of the film libraries or something like that."



Which means that's as good an excuse as any for having her at Ericsson, thought Dudley. Anyway, I'm glad Jack is the sort to be realistic about things like bars and other . . . recreation. There'd be more guys turning a little variable from too much time in space without some outlet.

"Here she comes with Myra," said his host. "Name's Eileen."

Dudley smiled at Mrs. Fisher and was introduced to the red-haired girl with her. Eileen eyed him speculatively, then donned her best air of friendliness. The evening passed rapidly.

For the next few days, besides seeing the Fishers and looking up the men who were to be his crew, Dudley spent a lot of time with Eileen. There seemed to be little difficulty about her getting time off from whatever her official duties were. She showed him all the bars and movie theatres and other amusements that the underground city could boast, and Dudley made the most of them in spite of his recent visit to Terra. On the Mars-bound rocket, they would be lucky if allowed one deck of cards and half a dozen books for the entertainment of the four of them.

It was on the "evening" of his third day that the specter haunting the back of his mind pushed forward to confront him. He had listened for gossip, but there had been no word of the discovery of an un-

authorized arrival. Then, as he was taking Eileen to her underground apartment, he heard his name called.

There she was, with an escort of three young men he guessed to be operators of the machinery that still drilled out new corridors in the rock around the city. Somehow she had exchanged the black slack suit for a bright red dress that was even more daring than Eileen's. In the regulated temperature, clothing was generally light, but Dudley's first thought was that this was overdoing a good thing.

"May I have a word with you, Dudley?" Kathi asked, coming across the corridor while her young men waited with shifting feet and displeased looks.

Dudley glanced helplessly at Eileen, wondering about an introduction. He had never bothered to learn her last name, and he had no idea of what name Kathi was using. The redhead had pity on him.

"My door's only a few yards down," she said. "I'll wait."

She swept Kathi with a glance of amused confidence and walked away. It seemed to Dudley that she made sure the three young men followed her with their eyes; but then he was kicking off for Mars within twenty-four hours, so he could hardly object to that.

"Have you changed your mind?" demanded Kathi with a fierce eagerness.

"Not so loud!" hushed Dud-

ley. "About what? And how did you get that rig?"

Had he been less dismayed at her presence, he might have remarked that the tight dress only emphasized her immaturity, but she gave him no time to say more.

"About Mars, Dudley. Can't you take me? I'm afraid those illegitimate blood-suckers are going to send after me. They could sniff out which way a nickel rolled in a coal-bin."

"Aren't you just a shade young for that kind of talk?"

"I guess I'm a little frightened," she admitted.

"You frighten me, too," he retorted. "How are you . . . I mean, what do you—?"

She tossed her blonde hair.

"There are ways to get along here, I found out. I didn't get arrested this time, did I? So why can't you take a chance with me to Mars?"

"Take an eclipse on that," said Dudley with a flat sweep of his hand. "It's just out of the question. For one thing, there are four of us going, and you can't hide for the whole trip without *somebody* catching on."

"All right," she said quietly. "Why not?"

"What do you mean, 'Why not?'"

"I'm willing to earn my passage. What if there *are* four of you?"

For a long moment, Dudley discovered things about himself, with

the sudden realization that the idea appealed to some suppressed part of his mind. He had never kidded himself about being a saint. The thing had possibilities. *Maybe one of the others can be talked into restraint into her.*

He snapped out of it. "Don't be a little fool!" he grated. "If you want my advice, you'll—."

"Well, I *don't* want your goddam advice! If you're too yellow to try it, I'll find somebody else. There'll be another rocket after yours, you know. Maybe they'll have a *man* on it!"

He felt his face go white and then flush as he stared at her. He did not know what to say. She looked like a child, but the outburst was more than a mere tantrum.

Sounds as if she's never been crossed before, he thought. *I ought to haul off and slap a little self-restraint into her.*

Instead, he beckoned to the three men, who had been edging closer with aggrieved expressions.

"How about taking your girl friend along?" he said flatly.

One of them took her by the elbow and tried to murmur something in her ear, but Kathi shook him off.

"If you are afraid for your license, Dudley, I'll say I hid without your knowing it. I'll say one of the others let me in. Please, Dudley. I'm sorry I talked to you like that."

She was making a fool of him,

and of herself, he decided. And in another minute, she would spill the whole thing, the way she was sounding off. And her friends were beginning to look hostile as it was.

"What's the trouble?" asked one of them.

"Nothing that won't clear up if you pour a couple of drinks into her," said Dudley disgustedly.

He walked away, and they held her from following.

"Dudley!" she yelled after him. "They'll send me back! Please, Dudley. I won't go. You remember what I said about going back—"

Her voice was getting too shrill. Someone in the group must have put his hand over her mouth, for when Dudley looked back, they were rounding a corner of the corridor more or less silently.

Eileen waited in the half-open door, watching him quizzically. "Friend of yours?" she drawled.

"After a fashion," admitted Dudley, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead. "Spoiled brat!"

He fumbled in a pocket of his jacket, and withdrew a small package. "Here's the bracelet that matches that necklace," he said. "I knew I had it in my locker somewhere."

Her thanks were very adequate.

"Aren't you coming in?" Eileen asked after the pause.

"No . . . I don't . . . I have to get a good night's sleep, you know. We kick off tomorrow."

She pursed her lips in a small

pout, but shrugged. "Then look me up when you get back, Pete."

"Yeah. Sure."

He kissed her quickly and walked away, drumming the fingers of his right hand against his thigh.

Except for the tenseness of blasting off and landing, the round trip to Mars was as boring as he expected. Campiglia won too many chess games at one move per watch, and the deck of cards wore out. For a few days, Wells had a slightly infected finger after cutting himself, but it was a small crisis. The layover on Mars was short, and the thrill was no longer new.

Dudley was glad to step out of the big rocket on Luna.

They had come in during the sleeping period at Ericsson, so the four of them had gone to their quarters for a few hours of sleep after the first babble of welcome from those on duty when they landed. Dudley was awakened by Jack Fisher.

"So early?" he grunted, squinting at his watch. "What brings you around?"

"Fisher settled his bulk in the only chair of the bedroom that was to be Dudley's until his next Terra-bound rocket.

"Liable to be busy today," he said easily, "so I thought I'd have breakfast with you."

"Fine!" said Dudley. "Wait'll I shave and I'll be with you."

When he returned from the bath-

room, he thought that he had perfect control of his features. There might not be anything wrong, but it seemed odd that Jack should be around so soon. He wondered if the Kathi Foster affair was in the background.

They went up a few levels to a minor eating place and had scrambled eggs that almost tasted natural. Over the coffee, Fisher opened up.

"Had a little excitement while you were gone," he said.

"Yeah? What?"

Fisher let him wait while he carefully unwrapped the half-smoked remains of a cigar. Tobacco in any form was strictly rationed in all Lunar settlements.

"Ever hear of old Robert Forgeron?" he asked.

"The one they used to call 'Robber' Forgeron?"

"That's right. He had so many patents on airlock mechanisms and space-suit gadgets and rocket control instruments that he made the goddamnedest fortune ever heard of out of space exploration. Died a few years ago."

Dudley maintained a puzzled silence.

"Seems the old man had strong ideas about that fortune," continued Fisher. "Left the bulk of it to his only granddaughter."

"That must have made headlines," Dudley commented.

"Sure did." Fisher had the cigar going, now, and he puffed econom-

ically upon it. "Especially when she ran away from home."

"Oh?" Dudley felt it coming. "Where to?"

"Here!"

Fisher held his cigar between thumb and forefinger and examined it fondly.

"Said her name was Kathi Foster instead of Kathi Forgeron. After they got around to guessing she was on Luna, and sent descriptions, we picked her up, of course. Shortly after you kicked off for Mars, in fact."

Dudley was silent. The other's shrewd little eyes glinted blue at him through the cigar smoke.

"How about it, Pete? I've been trying to figure how she got here. If it was you, you needn't worry about the regulations. There was some sort of litigation going on, and all kinds of relatives came boiling up here to get her. All the hullabaloo is over by now."

Dudley took a deep breath, and told his side of the story. Fisher listened quietly, nodding occasionally with the satisfaction of one who had guessed the answer.

"So you see how it was, Jack. I didn't really believe the kid's story. And she was so wild about it!"

Fisher put out his cigar with loving care.

"Got to save the rest of this for dinner," he said. "Yes, she was wild, in a way. You should hear—well, that's in the files. Before we were

sure who she was, Snowdon put her on as a secretary in his section."

"She didn't look to me like a typist," objected Dudley.

"Oh, she wasn't," said Fisher, without elaborating. "I suppose if she *was* a little nuts, she *was* just a victim of the times. If it hadn't been for the sudden plunge into space, old Forgeron wouldn't have made such a pile of quick money. Then his granddaughter might have grown up in a normal home, instead of feeling she was just a target. If she'd been born a generation earlier or later, she might have been okay."

Dudley thought of the girl's pleading, her frenzy to escape her environment.

"So I suppose they dragged her back," he said. "Which loving relative won custody of the money?"

"That's still going on," Fisher told him. "It's tougher than ever, I hear, because she didn't go down with them. She talked somebody into letting her have a space-suit and walked out to the other side of the ringwall. All the way to the foothills on the other side."

Dudley stared at him in mounting horror. Fisher seemed undisturbed, but the pilot knew his friend better than that. It could only mean that the other had had three months to become accustomed to the idea. He was tenderly tucking away the stub of his cigar.

"Wasn't so bad, I guess," he answered Dudley's unspoken ques-

tion. "She took a pill and sat down. Couple of rock-tappers looking for ore found her. Frozen stiff, of course, when her batteries ran down."

Dudley planted his elbows on the table and leaned his head in his hands.

"I should have taken her to Mars!" he groaned.

"She tried that on you, too?" Fisher was unsurprised. "No, Pete, it wouldn't have done any good. Would've lost you your job, probably. Like I said, she was born the wrong time. They won't have room for the likes of her on Mars for a good many years yet."

"So they hauled her back to Terra, I suppose."

"Oh, no. The relatives are fighting that out, too. So, until the judges get their injunctions shuffled and dealt, little Kathi is sitting out there viewing the Rockies and the stars."

He looked up at Dudley's stifled exclamation.

"Well, it's good and cold out there," he said defensively. "We don't have any spare space around here to store delayed shipments, you know. We're waitin' to see who gets possession."

Dudley rose, his face white. He was abruptly conscious once more of other conversations around them, as he stalked toward the exit.

"Hey," Fisher called after him, "that redhead, Eileen, told me to

ask if you're taking her out tonight."

Dudley paused. He ran a hand over his face. "Yeah, I guess so," he said.

He went out, thinking, *I should have taken her. The hell with regulations and Jack's theories about her being born too soon to be useful on Mars. She might have straightened out.*

He headed for the tunnel that led to the loading domes.

Ericsson was a large crater, over a hundred miles across and with a beautifully intact ringwall, so it took him some hours, even with the tractor he borrowed, to go as far as the edge of the crater. Jack Fisher was waiting for him in the surface dome when he returned hours later.

"Welcome back," he said, chewing nervously on his cigar. "I was wondering if we'd have to go looking for you." He looked relieved.

"How did she look?" he asked casually, as Dudley climbed out of his space suit in the locker room.

Dudley peeled off the one-piece suit he had worn under the heating pads. He sniffed.

"Chee-rist, I need a shower after that . . . She looked all right. Pretty cute, in a way. Like she was happy here on Luna."

He picked up towel and soap. "So I fixed it so she could stay," he added.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at Fisher. "Are you asking as a friend or as a cop?"

"What difference does it make?" asked Fisher.

"Well, I don't think you could have tracked me with your radar past the ringwall, so maybe I just went for a ride and a little stroll, huh? You didn't see me bring back a shovel, did you?"

"No," said Fisher, "I didn't see you bring it back. But some people are going to get excited about this, Pete. Where did you bury her?"

"Blood-suckers!" said Dudley. "Let them get excited! Luna is full of mysteries."

"All right," said Fisher. "For my own curiosity, then, I'm asking as a friend."

"I found a good place," said Dudley. "I kind of forget where, in the middle of all those cliffs and rills, but it had a nice view of the stars. They'll never find her to take her back! I think I owed her that much."

"Ummm," grunted Fisher.

As Dudley entered the shower, the other began to unwrap a new cigar, a not-displeased expression settling over his square, pudgy face.

Under the slow-falling streams of warm water, Dudley gradually began to relax. He felt the stiffness ease out of his jaw muscles. He turned off the bubbling water before he could begin imagining he was hearing a scared voice pleading again for passage to Mars . . . * * *



TIME and the WOMAN

NINON STRETCHED. And purred, almost. There was something lazily catlike in her flexing; languid, yet ferally alert. The silken softness of her couch yielded to her body as she rubbed against it in sensual delight. There was almost the lithe-ness of youth in her movements.

It was true that some of her joints seemed to have a hint of stiffness in them, but only *she* knew it. And if some of the muscles beneath her polished skin did not respond with quite the resilience of the youth they once had, only *she* knew that, too. *But they would again*, she told herself fiercely.

She caught herself. She had let down her guard for an instant, and a frown had started. She banished it imperiously. Frowns—just one frown—could start a wrinkle! And nothing was as stubborn as a wrinkle. One soft, round, white, long-nailed finger touched here, and here, and there—the corners of her eyes, the corners of her mouth, smoothing them.

Wrinkles acknowledged only one master, the bio-knife of the facial surgeons. But the bio-knife could not thrust deep enough to excise the stiffness in a joint; was not clever enough to remold the out-



by G. Gordon Dewey

lines of a figure where they were beginning to blur and—sag.

No one else could see it—yet. But Ninon could!

Again the frown almost came, and again she scourged it fiercely into the back of her mind. Time was her enemy. But she had had other enemies, and destroyed them,

**HER ONLY PASSION WAS
BEAUTY—BEAUTY WHICH
WOULD LAST FOREVER. AND
FOR IT—SHE'D DO ANYTHING!**



one way or another, cleverly or ruthlessly as circumstances demanded. Time, too, could be destroyed. Or enslaved. Ninon sorted through her meagre store of remembered reading. Some old philosopher had said, "If you can't whip 'em, join 'em!" Crude, but apt.

Ninon wanted to smile. But smiles made wrinkles, too. She was content to feel that sureness of power in her grasp—the certain knowledge that she, first of all people, would turn Time on itself and destroy it. She would be youthful again. She would thread through the ages to come, like a silver needle drawing a golden filament through the layer on layer of the cloth of years that would engarment her eternal youth. Ninon knew how.

Her shining, gray-green eyes strayed to the one door in her apartment through which no man had ever gone. There the exercising machines; the lotions; the unguents; the diets; the radioactive drugs; the records of endocrine transplantations, of blood transfusions. She dismissed them contemptuously. Toys! The mirages of a pseudo-youth. She would leave them here for someone else to use in masking the downhill years.

There, on the floor beside her, was the answer she had sought so long. A book. "Time in Relation to Time." The name of the author, his academic record in theoretical physics, the cautious, scientific wording of his postulates, meant nothing to

her. The one thing that had meaning for her was that Time could be manipulated. And she would manipulate it. For Ninon!

The door chimes tinkled intimately. Ninon glanced at her watch—Robert was on time. She arose from the couch, made sure that the light was behind her at just the right angle so he could see the outlines of her figure through the sheerness of her gown, then went to the door and opened it.

A young man stood there. Young, handsome, strong, his eyes aglow with the desire he felt, Ninon knew, when he saw her. He took one quick step forward to clasp her in his strong young arms.

"Ninon, my darling," he whispered huskily.

Ninon did not have to make her voice throaty any more, and that annoyed her too. Once she had had to do it deliberately. But now, through the years, it had deepened.

"Not yet, Robert," she whispered. She let him feel the slight but firm resistance so nicely calculated to breach his own; watched the deepening flush of his cheeks with the clinical sureness that a thousand such experiences with men had given her.

Then, "Come in, Robert," she said, moving back a step. "I've been waiting for you."

She noted, approvingly, that Robert was in his spaceman's uniform, ready for the morrow's flight, as he went past her to the couch. She

pushed the button which closed and locked the door, then seated herself beside the young spaceman on the silken couch.

His hands rested on her shoulders and he turned her until they faced each other.

"Ninon," he said, "you are so beautiful. Let me look at you for a long time—to carry your image with me through all of time and space."

Again Ninon let him feel just a hint of resistance, and risked a tiny pout. "If you could just take me with you, Robert . . ."

Robert's face clouded. "If I only could!" he said wistfully. "If there were only room. But this is an experimental flight—no more than two can go."

Again his arms went around her and he leaned closer.

"Wait!" Ninon said, pushing him back.

"Wait? Wait for what?" Robert glanced at his watch. "Time is running out. I have to be at the spaceport by dawn—three hours from now."

Ninon said, "But that's three hours, Robert."

"But I haven't slept yet tonight. There's been so much to do. I should rest a little."

"I'll be more than rest for you."

"Yes, Ninon . . . Oh, yes."

"Not yet, darling." Again her hands were between them. "First, tell me about the flight tomorrow."

The young spaceman's eyes were puzzled, hurt. "But Ninon, I've told you before . . . there is so much of you that I want to remember . . . so little time left . . . and you'll be gone when I get back . . ."

Ninon let her gray-green eyes narrow ever so slightly as she leaned away from him. But he blundered on.

" . . . or very old, no longer the Ninon I know . . . oh, all right. But you know all this already. We've had space flight for years, but only rocket-powered, restricting us to our own system. Now we have a new kind of drive. Theoretically we can travel faster than light—how many times faster we don't know yet. I'll start finding out tomorrow, with the first test flight of the ship in which the new drive is installed. If it works, the universe is ours—we can go anywhere."

"Will it work?" Ninon could not keep the avid greediness out of her voice.

Robert said, hesitantly, "We think it will. I'll know better by this time tomorrow."

"What of you—of me—. What does this mean to us—to people?"

Again the young spaceman hesitated. "We . . . we don't know, yet. We think that time won't have the same meaning to everyone . . ."

" . . . When you travel faster than light. Is that it?"

"Well . . . yes. Something like that."

"And I'll be—old—or dead, when you get back? If you get back?"

Robert leaned forward and buried his face in the silvery-blond hair which swept down over Ninon's shoulders.

"Don't say it, darling," he murmured.

This time Ninon permitted herself a wrinkling smile. If she was right, and she knew she was, it could make no difference now. There would be no wrinkles—there would be only the soft flexible skin, naturally soft and flexible, of real youth.

She reached behind her, over the end of the couch, and pushed three buttons. The light, already soft, dimmed slowly to the faintest of glows; a suave, perfumed dusk as precisely calculated as was the exact rate at which she let all resistance ebb from her body.

Robert's voice was muffled through her hair. "What were those clicks?" he asked.

Ninon's arms stole around his neck. "The lights," she whispered, "and a little automatic warning to tell you when it's time to go . . ."

The boy did not seem to remember about the third click. Ninon was not quite ready to tell him, yet. But she would . . .

Two hours later a golden-voiced bell chimed, softly, musically. The lights slowly brightened to no more than the lambent glow which was

all that Ninon permitted. She ran her fingers through the young spaceman's tousled hair and shook him gently.

"It's time to go, Robert," she said.

Robert fought back from the stubborn grasp of sleep. "So soon?" he mumbled.

"And I'm going with you," Ninon said.

This brought him fully awake. "I'm sorry, Ninon. You can't!" He sat up and yawned, stretched, the healthy stretch of resilient youth. Then he reached for the jacket he had tossed over on a chair.

Ninon watched him with envious eyes, waiting until he was fully alert.

"Robert!" she said, and the youth paused at the sharpness of her voice. "How old are you?"

"I've told you before, darling—twenty-four."

"How old do you think I am?"

He gazed at her in silent curiosity for a moment, then said, "Come to think of it, you've never told me. About twenty-two or -three, I'd say."

"Tomorrow is my birthday. I'll be fifty-two."

He stared at her in shocked amazement. Then, as his gaze went over the smooth lines of her body, the amazement gave way to disbelief, and he chuckled. "The way you said it, Ninon, almost had me believing you. You can't possibly be

that old, or anywhere near it. You're joking."

Ninon's voice was cold. She repeated it: "I am fifty-two years old. I knew your father, before you were born."

This time she could see that he believed it. The horror he felt was easy to read on his face while he struggled to speak. "Then . . . God help me . . . I've been making love to . . . an old woman!" His voice was low, bitter, accusing.

Ninon slapped him.

He swayed slightly, then his features froze as the red marks of her fingers traced across his left cheek. At last he bowed, mockingly, and said, "Your pardon, Madame. I forgot myself. My father taught me to be respectful to my elders."

For that Ninon could have killed him. As he turned to leave, her hand sought the tiny, feather-light betagun cunningly concealed in the folds of her gown. But the driving force of her desire made her stay her hand.

"Robert!" she said in peremptory tones.

The youth paused at the door and glanced back, making no effort to conceal the loathing she had aroused in him. "What do you want?"

Ninon said, "You'll never make that flight without me . . . Watch!"

Swiftly she pushed buttons again. The room darkened, as before. Curtains at one end divided and rustled back, and a glowing screen

sprang to life on the wall revealed behind them. And there, in life and movement and color and sound and dimension, she—and Robert—projected themselves, together on the couch, beginning at the moment Ninon had pressed the three buttons earlier. Robert's arms were around her, his face buried in the hair falling over her shoulders . . .

The spaceman's voice was doubly bitter in the darkened room. "So that's it," he said. "A recording! Another one for your collection, I suppose. But of what use is it to you? I have neither money nor power. I'll be gone from this Earth in an hour. And you'll be gone from it, permanently—at your age—before I get back. I have nothing to lose, and you have nothing to gain."

Venomous with triumph, Ninon's voice was harsh even to her ears. "On the contrary, my proud and impetuous young spaceman, I have much to gain, more than you could ever understand. When it was announced that you were to be trained to command this experimental flight I made it my business to find out everything possible about you. One other man is going. He too has had the same training, and could take over in your place. A third man has also been trained, to stand by in reserve. You are supposed to have rested and slept the entire night. If the Commandant of Space Research knew that you had not . . ."

"I see. That's why you recorded

my visit tonight. But I leave in less than an hour. You'd never be able to tell Commander Pritchard in time to make any difference, and he'd never come here to see . . ."

Ninon laughed mirthlessly, and pressed buttons again. The screen changed, went blank for a moment, then figures appeared again. On the couch were she and a man, middle-aged, dignified in appearance, uniformed. Blane Pritchard, Commandant of Space Research. His arms were around her, and his face was buried in her hair. She let the recording run for a moment, then shut it off and turned up the lights.

To Robert, she said, "I think Commander Pritchard would be here in five minutes if I called and told him that I have information which seriously affects the success of the flight."

The young spaceman's face was white and stricken as he stared for long moments, wordless, at Ninon. Then in defeated tones he said, "You scheming witch! What do you want?"

There was no time to gloat over her victory. That would come later. Right now minutes counted. She snatched up a cloak, pushed Robert out through the door and hurried him along the hall and out into the street where his car waited.

"We must hurry," she said breathlessly. "We can get to the spaceship ahead of schedule, before your flight partner arrives, and be

gone from Earth before anyone knows what is happening. I'll be with you, in his place."

Robert did not offer to help her into the car, but got in first and waited until she closed the door behind her, then sped away from the curb and through the streets to the spaceport.

Ninon said, "Tell me, Robert, isn't it true that if a clock recedes from Earth at the speed of light, and if we could watch it as it did so, it would still be running but it would never show later time?"

The young man said gruffly, "Roughly so, according to theory."

"And if the clock went away from Earth faster than the speed of light, wouldn't it run backwards?"

The answer was curtly cautious. "It might appear to."

"Then if people travel at the speed of light they won't get any older?"

Robert flicked a curious glance at her. "If you could watch them from Earth they appear not to. But it's a matter of relativity . . ."

Ninon rushed on. She had studied that book carefully. "And if people travel faster than light, a lot faster, they'll grow younger, won't they?"

Robert said, "So that's what's in your mind." He busied himself with parking the car at the spaceport, then went on: "You want to go back in the past thirty years, and be a girl again. While I grow young-

er, too, into a boy, then a child, a baby, at last nothing . . ."

"I'll try to be sorry for you, Robert."

Ninon felt again for her beta-gun as he stared at her for a long minute, his gaze a curious mixture of amusement and pity. Then, "Come on," he said flatly, turning to lead the way to the gleaming space ship which poised, towering like a spire, in the center of the blast-off basin. And added, "I think I shall enjoy this trip, Madame, more than you will."

The young man's words seemed to imply a secret knowledge that Ninon did not possess. A sudden chill of apprehension rippled through her, and almost she turned back. But no . . . there was the ship! There was youth; and beauty; and the admiration of men, real admiration. Suppleness in her muscles and joints again. No more diets. No more transfusions. No more transplantations. No more the bio-knife. She could smile again, or frown again. And after a few years she could make the trip again . . . and again . . .

The space ship stood on fiery tiptoes and leaped from Earth, high into the heavens, and out and away. Past rusted Mars. Past the busy asteroids. Past the sleeping giants, Jupiter and Saturn. Past pale Uranus and Neptune; and frigid, shivering Pluto. Past a senseless, flam-

ing comet rushing inward towards its rendezvous with the Sun. And on out of the System into the steely blackness of space where the stars were hard, burnished points of light, unwinking, motionless; eyes—eyes staring at the ship, staring through the ports at Ninon where she lay, stiff and bruised and sore, in the contoured acceleration sling.

The yammering rockets cut off, and the ship seemed to poise on the ebon lip of a vast Stygian abyss.

Joints creaking, muscles protesting, Ninon pushed herself up and out of the sling against the artificial gravity of the ship. Robert was already seated at the controls.

"How fast are we going?" she asked; and her voice was rusty and harsh.

"Barely crawling, astronomically," he said shortly. "About forty-six thousand miles a minute."

"Is that as fast as the speed of light?"

"Hardly, Madame," he said, with a condescending chuckle.

"Then make it go faster!" she screamed. "And faster and faster—hurry! What are we waiting for?"

The young spaceman swivelled about in his seat. He looked haggard and drawn from the strain of the long acceleration. Despite herself, Ninon could feel the sagging in her own face; the sunkennes of her eyes. She felt tired, hating herself for it—hating having this young man see her.

He said, "The ship is on automatic control throughout. The course is plotted in advance; all operations are plotted. There is nothing we can do but wait. The light drive will cut in at the planned time."

"Time! Wait! That's all I hear!" Ninon shrieked. "Do something!"

Then she heard it. A low moan, starting from below the limit of audibility, then climbing, up and up and up and up, until it was a nerve-plucking whine that tore into her brain like a white-hot tuning fork. And still it climbed, up beyond the range of hearing, and up and up still more, till it could no longer be felt. But Ninon, as she stumbled back into the acceleration sling, sick and shaken, knew it was still there. The light drive!

She watched through the ports. The motionless, silent stars were moving now, coming toward them, faster and faster, as the ship swept out of the galaxy, shooting into her face like blazing pebbles from a giant slingshot.

She asked, "How fast are we going now?"

Robert's voice sounded far off as he replied, "We are approaching the speed of light."

"Make it go faster!" she cried. "Faster! Faster!"

She looked out the ports again; looked back behind them—and saw shining specks of glittering blackness falling away to melt into the

sootiness of space. She shuddered, and knew without asking that these were stars dropping behind at a rate greater than light speed.

"Now how fast are we going?" she asked. She was sure that her voice was stronger; that strength was flowing back into her muscles and bones.

"Nearly twice light speed."

"Faster!" she cried. "We must go much faster! I must be young again. Youthful, and gay, and alive and happy . . . Tell me, Robert, do you feel younger yet?"

He did not answer.

Ninon lay in the acceleration sling, gaining strength, and—she knew—youth. Her lost youth, coming back, to be spent all over again. How wonderful! No woman in all of time and history had ever done it. She would be immortal; forever young and lovely. She hardly noticed the stiffness in her joints when she got to her feet again—it was just from lying in the sling so long.

She made her voice light and gay. "Are we not going very, very fast, now, Robert?"

He answered without turning. "Yes. Many times the speed of light."

"I knew it . . . I knew it! Already I feel much younger. Don't you feel it too?"

He did not answer, and Ninon kept on talking. "How long have we been going, Robert?"

He said, "I don't know . . . depends on where you are."

"It must be hours . . . days . . . weeks. I should be hungry. Yes, I think I am hungry. I'll need food, lots of food. Young people have good appetites, don't they, Robert?"

He pointed to the provisions locker, and she got food out and made it ready. But she could eat but a few mouthfuls. *It's the excitement*, she told herself. After all, no other woman, ever, had gone back through the years to be young again . . .

Long hours she rested in the sling, gaining more strength for the day when they would land back on Earth and she could step out in all the springy vitality of a girl of twenty. And then as she watched through the ingenious ports she saw the stars of the far galaxies beginning to wheel about through space, and she knew that the ship had reached the halfway point and was turning to speed back through space to Earth, uncounted light-years behind them—or before them. And she would still continue to grow younger and younger . . .

She gazed at the slightly-blurred figure of the young spaceman on the far side of the compartment, focussing her eyes with effort. "You are looking much younger, Robert," she said. "Yes, I think you are becoming quite boyish, almost childish, in appearance."

He nodded slightly. "You may be right," he said.

"I must have a mirror," she cried. "I must see for myself how much younger I have become. I'll hardly recognize myself . . ."

"There is no mirror," he told her.

"No mirror? But how can I see . . ."

"Non-essentials were not included in the supplies on this ship. Mirrors are not essential—to men."

The mocking gravity in his voice infuriated her. "Then you shall be my mirror," she said. "Tell me, Robert, am I not now much younger? Am I not becoming more and more beautiful? Am I not in truth the most desirable of women? . . . But I forget. After all, you are only a boy, by now."

He said, "I'm afraid our scientists will have some new and interesting data on the effects of time in relation to time. Before long we'll begin to decelerate. It won't be easy or pleasant. I'll try to make you as comfortable as possible."

Ninon felt her face go white and stiff with rage. "What do you mean?"

Robert said, coldly brutal, "You're looking your age, Ninon. Every year of your fifty-two!"

Ninon snatched out the little beta-gun, then, leveled it and fired. And watched without remorse as the hungry electrons streamed forth to strike the young spaceman, turning him into a motionless, glowing

figure which rapidly became misty and wraith-like, at last to disappear, leaving only a swirl of sparkling haze where he had stood. This too disappeared as its separate particles drifted to the metallite walls of the space ship, discharged their energy and ceased to sparkle, leaving only a thin film of dust over all.

After a while Ninon got up again from the sling and made her way to the wall. She polished the dust away from a small area of it, trying to make the spot gleam enough so that she could use it for a mirror. She polished a long time, until at last she could see a ghostly reflection of her face in the rubbed spot.

Yes, unquestionably she was younger, more beautiful. Unquestionably Time was being kind to her, giving her back her youth. She was not sorry that Robert was gone—there would be many young men, men her own age, when she got back to Earth. And that would be soon. She must rest more, and be ready.

The light drive cut off, and the great ship slowly decelerated as it found its way back into the galaxy from which it had started. Found its way back into the System which had borne it. Ninon watched through the port as it slid in past the outer planets. Had they changed? No, she could not see that they had—only she had changed—

until Saturn loomed up through the port, so close by, it looked, that she might touch it. But Saturn had no rings. Here was change. She puzzled over it a moment, frowning—then forgot it when she recognized Jupiter again as Saturn fell behind. Next would be Mars . . .

But what was this? Not Mars! Not any planet she knew, or had seen before. Yet there, ahead, was Mars! A new planet, where the asteroids had been when she left! Was this the same system? Had there been a mistake in the calculations of the scientists and engineers who had plotted the course of the ship? Was something wrong?

But no matter—she was still Ninon. She was young and beautiful. And wherever she landed there would be excitement and rushing about as she told her story. And men would flock to her. Young, handsome men!

She tottered back to the sling, sank gratefully into the comfort of it, closed her eyes, and waited.

The ship landed automatically, lowering itself to the land on a pillar of rushing flame, needing no help from its passenger. Then the flame died away—and the ship—and Ninon—rested, quietly, serenely, while the rocket tubes crackled and cooled. The people outside gathered at a safe distance from it, waiting until they could come closer and greet the brave passengers who

had voyaged through space from no one knew where.

There was shouting and laughing and talking, and much speculation.

"The ship is from Maris, the red planet," someone said.

And another: "No, no! It is not of this system. See how the hull is pitted—it has traveled from afar."

An old man cried: "It is a demon ship. It has come to destroy us all."

A murmur went through the crowd, and some moved farther back for safety, watching with alert curiosity.

Then an engineer ventured close, and said, "The workmanship is similar to that in the space ship we are building, yet not the same. It is obviously not of our Aertb."

And a savant said, "Yes, not of this Aertb. But perhaps it is from a parallel time stream, where there is a system with planets and peoples like us."

Then a hatch opened in the towering flank of the ship, and a ramp slid forth and slanted to the ground. The mingled voices of the crowd attended it. The fearful ones backed farther away. Some stood their ground. And the braver ones moved closer.

But no one appeared in the open hatch; no one came down the ramp. At last the crowd surged forward again.

Among them were a youth and a girl who stood, hand in hand, at the foot of the ramp, gazing at it and

the ship with shining eyes, then at each other.

She said, "I wonder, Robin, what it would be like to travel through far space on such a ship as that."

He squeezed her hand and said, "We'll find out, Nina. Space travel will come, in our time, they've always said—and there is the proof of it."

The girl rested her head against the young man's shoulder. "You'll be one of the first, won't you, Robin? And you'll take me with you?"

He slipped an arm around her. "Of course. You know, Nina, our scientists say that if one could travel faster than the speed of light one could live in reverse. So when we get old we'll go out in space, very, very fast, and we'll grow young again, together!"

Then a shout went up from the two men who had gone up the ramp into the ship to greet whoever was aboard. They came hurrying down, and Robin and Nina crowded forward to hear what they had to report.

They were puffing from the rush of their excitement. "There is no one alive on the ship," they cried. "Only an old, withered, white-haired lady, lying dead . . . and alone. She must have fared long and far to have lived so long; to be so old in death. Space travel must be pleasant, indeed. It made her very happy, very, very happy—for there is a smile on her face." * * *

THE WAR WAS ON, THE FINAL CATAclysm HAD BEGUN.

WIPEd OUT, CENTURIES OF CULTURE BE

WHEN SYKIN SUPCEL was kidnaped, no one on Earth was less surprised than Dr. Horace Wilton, Chief Military Psychologist of the Solar Navy. And since he had been Sy's mentor, and obviously responsible for his safety, Dr. Wilton was the first high official sought by representatives of the news syndicates.

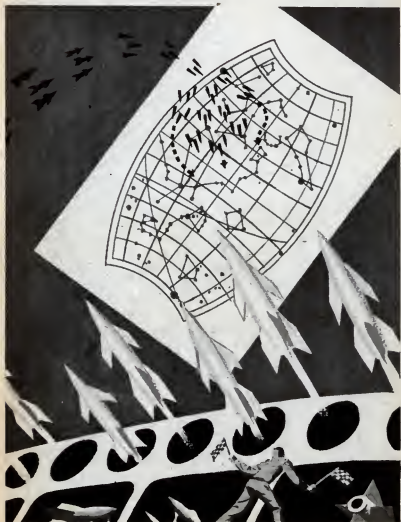
"It has become increasingly dif-

ficult," said the psychologist carefully to the group sitting in his office, "to ignore such actions by the Sur-Malic." He gazed through an open window-wall to where the newsmen's tiny jet-copters glinted beneath a summer sun at the forest's edge. "Of course, I might have predicted it; Sy insisted upon browsing through old city ruins for relaxation, and he seemed to de-

The BUTTERFLY KISS

by Arthur Dekker Savage

THOUSANDS WOULD DIE, EONS OF HUMAN HISTORY WOULD BE
DESTROYED...UNLESS ONE MAN COULD CARRY OUT HIS PLAN.



light in eluding his guard escort."

A reporter with the long nose and narrow head of a Venusian—or, for that matter, a Sur-Malic—raised his voice. "Y'mean he was all alone when he was snatched?"

The doctor rested one hip on the edge of a gleaming alloy desk. Military specifications, like civilian preference, demanded that every artifact possible be of enduring, stainless metal. "I am afraid so," he answered slowly.

"Then how," demanded the reporter, "d'you know it was the Sur-Malic that got him?"

"Simple logic. The Sur-Malic have been sporadically making off with first-class Earth scientists for a century—and Sy had recently developed an important improvement in our so-called cosmic ray engine. If he is forced to divulge the information, there may be tragic repercussions to the Interstellar League." Pencils raced eagerly across note pads. "Furthermore, Sy was well equipped to handle any ordinary emergency. Nor would a League world commit such an act, while any member of the Radical Alliance other than the Sur-Malic would be incapable of it."

A stocky brown Martian glowered. "Why the hell, sir, don't we wipe out the Sur-Malic? We all know they're straining every seam to get a war fleet built on Pronuleon II, and that their attack's only a matter of time. If we hit them where they

are, they'd never recover—but if we wait for them to strike first . . ."

Dr. Wilton held up his hand to stem the torrent. "I can't speak for the government, young man, but I might point out that it has never been our policy to foment war. We are making such preparations as allotted funds permit, and the combined Solar Fleet is on the alert. Also, *knowing* that the Sur-Malic stole our laboratory speci—er—Unique, and being able to *prove* it are two different matters."

"Excuse me, doctor." A keen-eyed Earth reporter stood up. "You started to say 'specimen'. How about that? Are Sy and the other Uniques in the special lab groups actually some kind of humanoid robots or something? I know it's top-drawer stuff, but are these Uniques actually people? Do you make 'em, or are they born, or what? What are they for, and why their odd names?" He resumed his seat. The others maintained an expectant silence. It was not often they found themselves in the tropical, trackless forest area of the American Great Lakes region, which was almost invisibly dotted with naval installations, and personal interviews with military psychologists were rare events; but data pertaining to the almost fabulous Uniques would take news precedence on every video screen of the meadow, valley and woodland homes of Earth.

Dr. Wilton neatly snipped the

legal filter from a cigarette, evoking sympathetic grins from his audience. Many took immediate advantage of the tacit permission to smoke. "I can answer those questions safely, I am sure. First," he smiled, "your shrewd observation of the term 'specimen': in some respects the Uniques are specimens—but only to the extent that in childhood some of them underwent certain surgical operations, mainly brain and glandular. All were kept on special diets during their early youth, and were meticulously trained by special instructors and psychologists. Other than having exceptional attributes in one or more designated fields, they are as normal as you and I—if you will pardon my hopeful attitude about myself."

There was a ripple of subdued laughter. The doctor cleared his throat and shifted his position. "They are the children of normal Earth parents, and are selected quietly, with parental approval, when certain combinations of factors appear on their school entrance examination records. They are naturally gifted; we try to encourage and improve these gifts, so that when they reach adulthood they will have a particular skill or skills to employ in the research and developmental laboratories. They are citizens, of course—and extremely valuable ones; they receive salaries commensurate with their military

rank; they are free to travel, but we try to guard them against accident and mishap. Their real names are not revealed for security reasons; their laboratory names, such as Sykin Supcel AA-87, are a sort of code which designates their capabilities to their instructors and teammates."

He pressed a button on his desk. "To establish their complete normalcy, you might like to meet Arna Matt A-94, who happens to be waiting in the next room."

A door opened. A girl stopped on the threshold, a picture of poised surprise. The men looked at her appreciatively.

"Come in, my dear."

She moved to the doctor's side, lithely and with an easy grace. The shining metallic cloth of her brief uniform rustled in the silence. Many breaths were expelled at the same time, and she repressed a smile.

Dr. Wilton introduced her. "You will notice—" he coughed—"you have noticed," he continued broadly, "that Arna possesses several attributes." There were low murmurings. "But the single A in her number indicates that she ranks at the top of one field, and the number itself means that she is the ninety-fourth to become a trainee in the program which develops these unique humans; her code name reveals that she possesses Awareness in Mathematics—which is to say that she somehow immediately

knows the answer to any mathematical problem presented, without having to consciously calculate or even think about it. Her particular gift was known on Earth as far back as the Seventeenth Century, but it has always been extremely rare and relatively undeveloped."

"Can she talk?" questioned a voice good-humoredly.

The psychologist chuckled. "Say something for the boys, Arna," he invited.

With the timing of a video star the girl parted her lips provocatively, leaned slightly forward and then, when expectancy was at its height, said "Boo!"

Friendly laughter echoed through



the paneled room, coming from all but the Venusian. He rose stiffly. "This is all very well, but we're here t'get *all* the dope on Sykin Supcel. Aren't you holding out something?"

Dr. Wilton looked at the man squarely. "Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I am." His gaze swept the others. "The interview is terminated, gentlemen—I hope your news stories will be sufficiently popular to make your trip worthwhile. Your lapel cameras and their eyepieces will be returned as you enter your 'cop-ters.'"

The Venusian was the first to voice his thanks, with a ring of sincerity as true as in the others' polite speeches.

Alone with Arna, Dr. Wilton punched several buttons on the desk, consulted a memo and spoke briskly to a blank video screen. "Start—all—in. Step seven two eight of Operation Catskin successful. Sur-Malic spy among reporters, as predicted by eighty-two point six probability. Lor'lsoon, posing as Venusian, exposed by his inadequate training—probability about sixty; his unconscious belligerency—probability about ninety. He is to be undisturbed for forty-eight hours, then detained after an apparently routine round-up. Any contacts he may reveal during the next two days are to be observed but not disturbed. End—all—out."

Arna leaned over the desk and kissed him lightly. "Nice work,

Dad." Then she went on, tensely: "Any word from Sy—or is he supposed to make contact later?"

It was by merest chance that Sykin Supcel happened to be at the military spaceport of Dirik when the prisoner was made to land—and he had brought along an alibi to prove it. A year after his capture and removal to the key city of Pronuleon II, he had successfully convinced the Sur-Malic High Command that he would have been a willing traitor even without the rank and gold and promises. "Damned, dirty Earth lice," he had been wont to growl—at precisely propitious moments — "murdered my folks and stuck me in a stinking lab and cut up my insides—can't even be comfortable in a room with regular people because my temperature's too high. I'll wreck the whole League for that!" And he would angrily swipe at a perspiring brow.

It was easily established that his normal body temperature stayed about two degrees above average; he early established his need for long, cooling outdoor walks through the semi-tropical city and surrounding countryside. He had become the most trusted of all renegade aliens after voluntarily becoming a Sur-Malic citizen of Pronuleon II.

This afternoon he had insisted that Commander Rilth, his immediate superior in war fleet construc-

tion, walk with him in one of his restless moods. They had left the mighty hangars where Sy was supervising experimental work with the Earth-developed cosmic ray engines, and were lounging on a stone bench at the edge of the field, shaded from blazing yellow Pronuleon by a huge tree.

"It's the theoretical math, Rilth," complained Sy. "We just haven't got the calculators that Earth has. Slows things no end."

The thin, grim commandant turned to him. "Cursed theory is always a problem to a Sur-Malic. We hoped that your weak genius would be of avail!"

"Well, it's availing, isn't it?" Sy demanded gruffly. "If I had assistants that were anything but idiots, the job would be done!" In the cruel, ruthless culture of the Sur-Malic, this was no argument, but an accepted form of discussion, without rancor.

When Rilth did not answer, Sy gloomily watched the prisoner being escorted across the field. Suddenly he stood up and squinted at the group in the distance. "Say—who's that they're bringing in?"

Rilth strained to see. "Some rotten Earthling or Aldeberanian, no doubt. They look alike to me—and both are Leaguers."

Sy tugged at the other's arm excitedly. "Come on—let's get over to Detention Headquarters. If that's who I think it is, we'll have our

new engines—installed—in three months!"

The Sur-Malic jerked free of Sy's hand, but matched his trot across the field. Although he moved carefully, it seemed that whenever he glanced away from the ground small stones somehow managed to be under the edges of his soles, causing him to lurch, stumble and curse.

"You'll have to quit soaking up that cheap stuff, Rilth," taunted Sy. "You're clumsy as a bovine!" He dropped slightly to the rear, his loose, raw-boned frame jogging along without effort, his eyes darting ahead at the terrain.

Rilth looked at him with a snarl, uttered a stream of invectives. But as one foot landed on the end of a small branch the opposite end whipped up and blocked his other ankle. He sprawled in the dirt.

"Slimy beast!" he raged. He drew away from Sy's mocking offer of assistance. "It seems that in your vile presence all things go wrong!"

Inside the grey stone Detention building, Sy became suddenly exuberant. He made for the prisoner eagerly. Guards, in deference to his uniform insignia, stood aside at his approach.

"Arna!" He folded the girl in his arms, burying his face in the long waves beneath her trim headgear. "Love me," he whispered quickly. "Hate Earth—weak will—faint."

The girl looked at him. Her ex-

pression, which could be interpreted as surprise either on the basis of recognition or of a stranger's unexpected actions, changed to one of adoration. "Darling!" she gasped. She tried to embrace him, but apparently the strain of her past few hours had been too great; she slumped in his arms.

"Get a doctor!" Sy shouted to evoke maximum confusion. He lowered Arna to the floor as though her weight were too much to hold; a living pretense of physical weakness had served well to counteract envy. He made no attempt to cover her long, smooth thigh when it became exposed at the action—effectively diverting the guards' thoughts and eradicating any suspicion they might have felt at his behavior. He appealed to Rilth with his eyes. "She must be sick! Damn it, man, get a doctor!"

The commandant regarded him narrowly. "Anyone with the mind of a worm could see she has only fainted. She will revive shortly."

Arna did recover as predicted, coincident with the arrival of Lord Krut of the High Command. Sy pleaded his case artfully. "It was the work of genius, Your Lordship, to find Arna Matt—the one person in space who can hasten our plans! As you know, she is a human calculator, as well as—well—we were just about to escape the Earth laboratories and get married when you found me and brought me here."

Lord Krut glowered. He pondered before answering. "We neither planned her capture nor knew her qualities, High Technician Supcel," he said heavily. "Our scoutships noticed her craft near Aldebaran, marked with the League military insignia. Following our policy of harassment, the scouts destroyed her escort ships. She," he gestured, "surrendered." His eyes raked slyly over the seemingly bewildered girl's body. "If we can use her talents, the Great Mokaine himself will be pleased. In view of your relationship, is it your opinion that she will not require indoctrination other than your efforts?"

"Hell, yes, Your Lordship. Why, they *tortured* her in the labs. If anything she hates the League worse than I do!" He placed an arm about the girl. "How about it, honey?"

Arna looked at Lord Krut with wide eyes. "Damn right," she said uncertainly. And then she asked meekly, "Could I have a drink of water, please?"

Sy seemed in no hurry to leave Detention Headquarters, even after Arna had been given over officially into his care with a token military rank. She had not batted an eyelash when Sy had explained to Rilth, with a leer, that his quarters would suffice for them both; she had even managed to *simper* a bit.

But, alone with Sy in his ample, almost luxurious apartment, with her personal gear from the *Needle*

stacked in the main room, she placed both hands on her hips and stared at him questioningly.

"Big stakes," said Sy with meaning. He rattled on with a patter of propaganda tailored for possible ears in the walls. He grinned at her obvious relief when he silently indicated a comfortable room for her private bedchamber. When at last they were outdoors, Sy ignored the ground vehicle at his disposal and led Arna along a winding, tree-lined roadway which led to the cavernous hangars. Once out of earshot of the buildings, he spoke abruptly: "They kill your escort?"

Arna looked surprised, then laughed throatily. "Poor Sy—always worrying about our personnel!" Her voice was soothing and melodious. "The other ships were dummies; Mek Enj rigged up a neat little autronic device, tuned to the *Needle's* controls. After your message for aid came to young Tel, I played meteor through half the galaxy, trying to get picked up!" She smiled at him. "Anyway, here I am. Have you run into trouble?"

He slipped an arm about her waist. "Sure have. I missed you like the devil."

Arna's smile faded. She slipped out of his embrace. "Sy! Do you mean to say you fished exposure of the only Sur-Malic-type telepath that young Tel can receive, when you didn't need help?"

Sy evaded the question. "Tomor-

row we can shoot over to Haldane," he suggested. "There's an old Earth clergyman there who got stranded when the Alliance broke off chummy relations with Leaguers."

Arna eyed him icily. "And why should we visit this clergyman?"

"Well," said Sy innocently, "the old guy's almost two hundred now, which is crowding the limit for his generation. And you know the Sur-Malic don't have any marriage cere—"

"Oh, you knobhead! Here you have the most critical job of anyone in the League, and—and—who said I was going to marry you, anyway?"

"I did," returned Sy promptly. "Remember? I've been telling you that since we were kids—and you never once denied it."

Arna made a sound that was partly a sob and partly a laugh. She shook her head unbelievably. "With the fate of a galaxy depending on your abilities and judgment, you drag me across a thousand million miles of space to prate about marriage."

"Yes," admitted Sy, "but think of how far it might have been. If spatial distances were actually as great as the old astronomers used to think, before they learned that light slows down after it travels—"

There was no slightest chance that Arna's small hand would actually strike Sy. She knew the at-

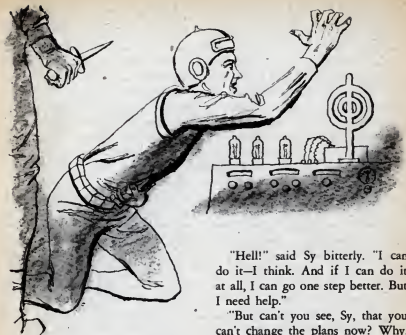
tempt was futile, but she tried her best—and uttered a rueful sound when the blow seemed to pass right through his cheek, while he apparently stood still, grinning. "Some day," she promised, "I'm going to shoot you in the back—just to see what happens."

"That sounds more like my cheerful little calc-bird," he said. "But let's wait till after we're married, huh?" They continued along the unpaved road.

"I think," Arna said levelly, "there will be no marriage. There will certainly be none for me until the completion of the unimportant, completely insignificant Operation Catskin—or," she finished sweetly, "have you given that any thought lately?"

Sy frowned. A small stone in the road suddenly sped along the ground and cracked against another; the other snapped away, rolled, slowed, reversed, shot backward and hit the first one. He spoke thoughtfully. "Yes, I've given it a great deal of thought. And there's going to be—uh—a slight change of plan. That's really why I needed you here, Arna."

The girl stared. "Sy! Have you shorted a circuit? For heaven's sake, don't you realize this thing has been planned, and calculated, and rearranged bit by bit for twenty years? That each of us is merely a small—no matter how important—cog in a far-reaching activity of infinite complexity? Don't you understand



that everything is in a state of delicate, constantly shifting balance, with ambassadors, scientists and agents making each tiny move with precise timing and skill throughout a hundred worlds? And you want to change things!" Her voice softened, and she laid a hand on his arm. "Sy," she pleaded, "if you've run into some insurmountable obstacle, let's report it and try to ease out without upsetting everything. That's happened three times before, you know, and it's no disgrace if you can't—"

"Hell!" said Sy bitterly. "I can do it—I think. And if I can do it at all, I can go one step better. But I need help."

"But can't you see, Sy, that you can't change the plans now? Why, no one even knows what you have in mind—and I won't have anything to do with it!"

The hangars loomed not far ahead. Sy spoke patiently. "Look. As it stands, Operation Catskin now boils down to installing new engines in the Sur-Malic fleet, slipping gimmicks into the stabilizer works and controlling the gimmicks psychokinetically when the League and Alliance fleets meet for battle. If the Alliance ships operate erratically, they can't bring their guns to bear, and the League will mop up—even with our pint-sized fleet and inferior armament.

Check?"

"Of course. That's what—"

"Okay. Now suppose we can rig a deal so it won't be necessary to shoot up the Alliance boats nor kill the poor deluded devils in them? The League wins the war, gets a brand-new, superior fleet, and hardly anyone gets smeared."

Arna sighed. "Let's be practical, Sy. All you know about engineering has been implanted hypnotically just for this job; all I can do is answer questions of pure math. I wouldn't know how to devise any gadgetry, and you're in no position to waste time trying—and in war some must be destroyed that others may survive."

"But suppose I've just about got the thing whipped already? I've learned enough, since I've been here, to rate Mech C even home."

"Sy, I just won't be a party to anything that might possibly upset League plans!"

Sy's chest heaved resignedly. "Will you help me with the computational math needed to finish Operation Catskin?"

"That's better!" Arna squeezed his arm happily. "Of course I will, you big, bony, restless idealist!"

He smiled fondly at her—at her answer, her young beauty and her nearness.

The weeks passed swiftly—weeks in which the swarming Sur-Malic workmen ripped from

their foundations the massive, cumbersome atomic converters of the mighty space fleet and replaced them with light, radically designed engines which would feed eternally upon the all-pervading cosmic emanations that streaked the universe.

Sy and Arna had worked furiously. Surrounded by a corps of physicists, mathematicians, engineers, technicians and draftsmen, Arna had unerringly replied to endless queries as fast as she could speak. Sy had translated equations, converted values, integrated, correlated and directed. Subtly, he had inserted certain innocent equations of his own bit by bit, fed his results into the basic plans and disguised the all-important device with the cloak of dual function—one of which was vital to ship performance, the other of which was vulnerable to his psychokinetic ability to move objects of small mass by mental concentration alone.

But all things are subject to the vagaries of pure chance. Commandant Rilth, as chief of the project, continually prowled the immense planning rooms, workshops and assembly areas, giving of his not-inconsiderable technical knowledge where needed. And one day he came upon Sy delicately checking the tiny installation which would spell doom to Alliance schemes of conquest.

"You have found a flaw, perhaps?" demanded the Sur-Malic officer. He squatted and peered

through the maze of ducts and cables at the shielded mechanism.

Sy crawled back out of the metallic web. "Not yet," he grunted. "I was just testing my brainstorm—works like a charm."

"To me," sneered Rilth, "it looks clumsy and inefficient. Could not your addled brain devise an electronic circuit, instead of a mechanical device subject to frictional wear?"

Sy wiped the perspiration from a dripping brow and spoke boldly. "This simplifies the master controls for your stupid crewmen. See those little plates on the shaft—like a butterfly's wings? When they fold up, the ship revolves; the closer together they get, the greater the artificial gravity. When they touch, you've got normal gravity in the ship. They function perfectly—and if you don't like them, rip them out of every boat and design your own G control!"

Rilth smiled coldly. "I suppose we must accept some of the more imbecilic aspects of your warped genius." He turned on his heel and left.

Sy whispered at his retreating back. "You'll never know *how* warped until that butterfly folds its wings *down*—and they kiss like little angels."

As the gigantic task of installation hummed and whined and boiled its way to completion, Sy and Arna found time to slip away

into sprawling, dirty Dirik, where war-feverish activity catered to the whims and desires of teeming, pleasure-seeking officers and common warriors. In the boisterous cafes the Earth couple sat close together and whispered freely, relaxing from their grueling pace. They watched the dull, surging masses of characteristically thin Sur-Malic commoners ebb and flow along the dim, moonless, star-canopied streets, seeking surcease from the demands of their cruel and exacting lords. Under the sting of stimulants, listless, drab women became as gay as their noisy companions. There was endless bicker and chatter.

Frequently the Earth pair walked along winding country lanes, hand in hand, inhaling deeply of cool, sweet air beneath the everlasting ebon arch of the heavens. On one such evening Sy turned in to a farmer's dimly lit cottage, almost concealed in a stygian grove of fruit trees, and called its occupant to the door. He introduced Arna to a lean, toothless, grinning man.

"This is Loor, darling, our loyal Venusian agent—our contact with young Tel and the League."

Loor served them with simple wine. He showed Arna the delicate telepathic amplifier which carried his mental transmissions across the dust-voids of space, to be received by the unaided mind of a youthful Unique. Afterward, he returned the apparatus to its place of conceal-

ment beneath the floor.

It was but a few days before the scheduled space trials of the fleet when Arna brought Sy disquieting news.

"I overheard Rilth say he was going to investigate the ships' G mechanism," she whispered rapidly. "He seems to be suspicious of—"

"Poor kid," Sy said loudly. "You can't work when you feel like that. You go on home and sleep." He added casually, "I may be late tonight—lots of work to do." He located Rilth in a great noisy hangar and piloted him away from a crowd of noisy engineers. "Filthy vermin," he said by way of greeting, "you look like you need an airing." He lowered his voice. "Let's dodge our females tonight and slice up Dirik a bit— it'd do us both good."

Rilth grimaced. "It is unfortunate, gutter-born, that Ruza wants to celebrate tonight. Some miserable party or other."

"You can always work late, can't you; son of cattle? We'll snag a couple of lively young peasants from one of the pleasure dens."

Rilth's cold eye glittered. "Your vile mouth speaks temptingly."

"I'll meet you at a sidewalk table of the Wild Snake, on the Street of Delight. We'll blast the town!"

It was completely dark when the two met at the cafe. They finished a goblet of wine, and Sy suggested they move on to a place he knew. They threaded their way through

jostling crowds and walked along side streets which led away from the city's riotous heart. Pedestrians became fewer. Rilth cursed Sy for not thinking to use a vehicle.

"It's just around the next corner, slimehead," Sy assured him. "And I've already made arrangements."

But there was a narrow, lightless alleyway a few steps ahead. Had Arna been following them, instead of at home worrying, she would have seen Sy stumble sideways at the mouth of the alley, bumping hard against his companion. She would have seen them both disappear into the blackness for an instant, and then would have seen Sy emerge from the shadows and reel onward alone, obviously drunk. Had she then rushed into the alley, she would have found Rilth's corpse sprawled on a pile of rubbish, still oozing gore from death wounds in throat and heart, and she might have noticed that his needle gun was gone, and that his empty money pouch lay on another wet stain of his uniform where a blade had been wiped clean.

By the time Sy returned to the Street of Delight his staggering gait had almost disappeared, and by the time he located a group of technicians whom he knew, dicing in a gambling establishment, it was gone entirely. He was welcomed with hearty curses into the group—and he began to play . . .

It is not known how far the story

eventually traveled—and certainly it did not penetrate even all of the city for many hours, or every gambling den would have bolted its doors—but by morning a goodly sector of Pronuleon II was buzzing with the tale. It seemed that a certain group of Fleet Technicians, led by a High Technician—an Earth renegade—known as Sykin Supcel, had broken the hearts and some of the furniture of every gambling proprietor in Dirik. Each player had made good every cast of the dice in a run of luck unequaled in the known universe, and had returned to their quarters in groaning ground vehicles only when there was no more gold coin to be found on the Street of Delight, the Avenue of Pleasure or the Way of Joy.

But Sy's exuberance was dulled the next day when he heard of the brutal robbery-assassination of his friend, Commandant Rilth. "Not that I bore any love for the reptile," he said sorrowfully to Lord Krut, thus spreading a counter-irritant for possible suspicion, "but he had a good head—a keen and valuable mind we would have missed sorely a month ago. As it is . . ." He straightened resignedly and accepted the responsibility of Acting Commandant of Fleet Construction Technicians.

A week later, in the midst of official excitement at the gratifyingly successful fleet trials, Sy and Arna slipped away by fast ground vehicle

to the tiny isolated cottage of old Loor. Hurriedly they set up the ampli-tel apparatus. Loor reclined on his rude cot with his long, narrow head in the mesh helmet, and Sy taped down contacts and checked adjustments. He and Arna huddled over the Venusian for half an hour, until he finally opened his eyes and smiled toothlessly.

"Contact with Tel. He says hello."

Sy's face was strained. "Okay. Give him this: Start—all—in. A nail and a corncob, a book and a button. No nail, no corncob, no book, no button. You can strum a zither. End—all—out."

Loor was silent in concentration. Finally he spoke. "Start—all—in. You need a drink. End—all—out."

"Good work, Loor!" Sy began to untape the contacts. "Your job here is now fin—"

The door creaked viciously wide. Arna gasped. A Sur-Malic officer behind a needle gun moved into the small room. Five others crowded in behind him, similarly armed.

The leader smiled venomously. "Very convenient, Sykin Supcel, for you to leave your vehicle in the open. We have been watching your purulent friend for days, but we didn't suspect tele—"

Even Arna, who knew what to expect, could detect only a blur of motion. Loor jumped nervously as a pistol stuttered four times and four tiny needles exploded in the floor; he blinked and finally man-

aged to focus his eyes on Sy only as the last Sur-Malic crumpled lifelessly.

"Solar Mother!" he muttered. "What happened?" He tore the helmet from his head and leaped spryly to his feet.

Arna answered while Sy wiped his long knife on one of the bodies and returned it to a sheath under his jacket. "Sy is able to move pretty fast," she explained. "It's one of his lab-developed abilities. The normal eye can't keep up with him when he puts on a spurt."

Loor continued to blink while Sy reduced the amplifier to jumbled scrap, and then the old man found his voice again. "Why," he asked Sy, "didn't you use your pistol on them. Wouldn't that be easier?"

Sy dragged the dead officers out of the doorway. "Can't depend on mechanical things," he said briefly. He mopped perspiration from his forehead and neck. "It's a matter of timing; I size up a situation, sort of estimate distances and positions, and kind of *see myself* carrying out the actions—and then I go into high gear. It's hard to see, hear, or even consciously think while I'm speeded up. At that speed triggers just don't pull fast enough."

"If those men had been able to move aside fast enough," said Arna, "Sy might have missed them entirely and not even known it until he slowed down again." She looked with distaste at the bodies, but

without repugnance or fear.

Sy hurriedly thrust a bulging pouch of gold into Loor's hand. "Lock this place up," he directed, "and start walking immediately for Haldane. We've got to assume we're all known to Sur-Malic Intelligence. Arna and I will remove the outside evidence. All we need now is a little chunk of time!"

He walked out warily and soon pulled away in the dead officers' vehicle. Arna followed close behind.

Having driven slowly back to Dirik, Sy parked beside a row of similar vehicles to the rear of a city food market in the merchandise district. He walked to where Arna waited and climbed into his own conveyance. "Head for our little love-nest, slave," he directed. "You'll want your toothbrush, and it would be a shame to leave my hard-won gold behind."

Arna breathed excitedly. "Are we leaving the planet, Sy? Is our work completed? Was that what your message meant?"

"My, what a curiosity!" he taunted. He placed an arm about her shoulders. "We're going into seclusion," he leered. "I'll have you all to myself for days and days! Won't that be fun?"

Arna squirmed. "Stop it, Sy—I almost hit that old woman! And stop making those pebbles jump up in the road!" She glanced at him biting. "I suppose you've got things all arranged so we'll have to

hide in a single room!"

"The choice is yours, love." He waved expansively. "Either we steal a scoutship or—how's the *Needle* for speed?"

"Oh, Sy! Can we actually get the *Needle*? She'll outstrip any warship! And she has a nice private compartment, with a good solid deck outside it for you. I'll loan you a pillow, maybe."

They took from the apartment only what would fit into small shoulder bags that were matched to their uniforms. Sy briefed Arna while they sped to the vast enclosure which walled off hundreds of impounded alien ships.

His towering rage was very evident even as he climbed from the ground vehicle. A callow sentry straightened at the approach of his glittering insignia. Sy fixed him with a malific eye. The youth's mouth began to twitch.

"Where," shouted Sy furiously, "is the moronic officer-in-charge?"

The sentry tried to speak.

"Never mind, you brainless rodent!" Sy roared. "Why wasn't that accursed League ship delivered to the testing grounds this morning?"

The boy began to stammer.

"Quiet, you miserable lump of offal!" screamed Sy. He turned and brutally cuffed Arna toward the gate. "Get in there, filthy drone, and raise that ship before I kick your belly to pulp!"

The sentry unlocked the high

gate frantically. He watched with ashen features as Sy followed Arna across the yard, cursing, striking and reviling her.

Out of the guard's sight, Sy quickly located the *Needle* and broke the port seal. Arna clambered in, adjusted controls to planetary drive, wakened the powerful engines to a sighing song of readiness and then ran to her bunk to strap herself down. Sy sealed the port and dived into the soft, deep clutches of the pilot's gimbaled throne. Within seconds the craft darted for the horizon, veered, and streaked out from the planet on a straight drive for the blinding orb of Pronuleon.

A hundred miles or more from the blue world behind, the *Needle* shot through the detector field of a Sur-Malic scoutship. Sy didn't bother to switch on audio for a challenge. Grimly, he located the scoutship's relative position by the pip on his detector screen and stabbed a pattern of buttons to spew quickly-congealing clouds of magnetized dust into automatically calculated trajectory paths. He smiled with relief as pips sparked into life, indicating the interception of homing missiles. Out of the pursuer's range, he set an erratic course for the sun and called to Arna.

For three clock periods they hugged blazing, searing Pronuleon in an orbit that was almost too close for safety. Refrigeration units strained far beyond specified toler-

ances. Twice, tail toward the inferno for minimum radiation absorption, they barely fought clear of stupendous, surging tentacles of the shifting, agonized gravitational fields of Pronuleon. But they could not be detected so close to a raging sun.

Arna, wretched and exhausted, the thin fabric of a single garment clinging wetly to her body, leaned wearily against the throne. "Isn't it possible they think we took a fast course for Sol?" she sighed.

"Very probable," Sy whispered gauntly. Only an hour before he had revealed what the girl already suspected—that his code message had been the long-awaited signal for the entire Interstellar League fleet to ring the void about Pronuleon II. "But on this mission we can't take chances."

Arna laughed feebly. "Can't take chances!" she echoed, and shook her head.

Sy attempted a smile, sopped the streaming sweat from his eyes and studied a chronometer. He clamped a drinking tube, then let it fall from his mouth. "Get on some clothes and G-shoes, woman. We're going to keep an appointment."

The *Needle's* rotation slowly died; the vessel turned, lined up with Pronuleon's orbit, burst her bonds with a tangential spurt and then arced away from the seething fury behind.

Free of the obliterating sea of

sun static, Sy threw open all detection and reception circuits and flung his detector field to its farthest reaches, dimming its accuracy but increasing its range. Immediately he stared in consternation at the activity in the three-dimensional depths of his screen. "Arna!" he called hoarsely. "Arna!" The girl ran clinkingly to him on jointed shoe-plates. "We're damn near too late," he groaned. "Look, the fleets are approaching each other!" The tiny red screen dot which indicated their position showed them to be on a course that would slice directly between both fleets. Sy leaped from the throne and fairly threw Arna into its confines. He braced his metal-shod feet on the deck and seized a ring cleat beside the control panel. "Steady as you go!" he gritted. "This is it—and we've got to make it!"

"Sy! Can you control the gadgets from this distance?"

"Yeah—but we've got to stay in planetary range. *Don't leave the Pronuleon system.*" His fingers sped along a row of knobs. "I've got to call our fleet."

"Contact the fleet *now*? But Sy—"

"Quiet, honey!" He glanced at her once, quickly. "I rigged those gadgets like I intended to."

"Sy!" It was almost a scream. "What have you—"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "And that's an order!" Ignoring secrecy, code and even special wavelength,

he signaled the League flagship on an open channel. He arranged a three-way video hook-up between the *Needle*, Admiral Grimes on the *Forward Star* and Dr. Horace Wilton on the *Mars Moon*. "No time," he ground out. "Operation set up as scheduled—but you won't have to fire. In five minutes all enemy crews will be flat under eight G's; when ships stop, grapple and board. Out!" He broke contact and turned to Arna. "Skitter and spit dust—use it all, but keep us clear for three minutes!" He locked both hands on the cleat and closed his eyes in concentration.

In the deep recesses of his mind, he created a clear picture of a typical, prototype butterfly gimmick. He imagined it in the approximate position it would be to keep a ship spinning slowly on its longitudinal axis—to exert the mild centrifugal force permitted for battle alert and preliminary maneuver. Then he *willed* the little wings to bend downward—slowly—past the null-G setting—to fold—down . . . to kiss . . . to close . . .

After a seeming century, and from a great distance, Arna's voice reached him, dragged him up from autohypnotic depths. "Sy! Sy! They've stopped firing! The League's closing in! Sy!"

He straightened, relaxed his bloodless grip on the cleat, drew a deep, shuddering breath, shook his

head to clear it. Throbbing pains began to course from his arms and shoulders, where they had been buffeted against the panel housing during Arna's wild, skillful gyrations. He looked at the screen, adjusted it for close range.

Mote beside mote, League ships had paired off with the furiously whirling Alliance craft, attending all the major vessels and as many smaller ones as their fewer numbers could cover. Sy smiled tiredly. He could almost see the Sur-Malic crewmen, unconscious, lying pinned to their decks by their own terrible weight. Briefly, he closed his eyes again . . .

"I couldn't actually test the gadget's reverse setting, of course," Sy explained to Dr. Wilton, "but I knew Arna's calc would check out to infinity." He glanced through a window at the celebrating throngs below, in the streets of Dirik. "And now, sir," he turned to the girl at his side, "I think she—uh—I mean we—or rather I have something to say to you, sir. Uh . . ." He flushed and hesitated.

Arna took over competently. "I guess I'll simply have to marry this bumbling hero, Dad. Not that I want to," she added, with a mischievous glance at Sy, "though his psychokinetics aren't much of a problem—but I just can't do a thing against that darn Superior Celerity he's been using on me!" • • •

MUSEUM PIECE

by John Christopher

SOMETIMES IT IS MORE

HONORABLE TO

FAIL TO DO YOUR DUTY...

Alpha 73. Sector 8. At the beginning there had been the great fleet, circling the earth, dipping through shadow and emerging again into the sunlight, like a shoal of twinkling fish. And afterwards the small fleets, setting off on their pre-arranged errands, heading outwards towards the infinite corners of the universe. And then smaller and smaller fleets as each group, accelerating far beyond the speed of light, split up into more and more spe-



cific routes. Now there was only 51-J712—the Pericles—hunting forward through solar systems more than five hundred light years distant from the parent planet.

STRICTLY SPEAKING the nav room was off limits to personnel not on duty. Lieutenant Don Parker felt a twinge of irritation in remembering this, for he was himself on duty and the groups of other junior officers, lounging in the transparent forward observation bulges, were an annoying source of distraction. He wondered what the duty officers on the Engines would say if he were to spend his own off-duty time getting in their way. But, of course, the Engines were a hell-hole depressing enough to keep away casual idlers. The nav room was the only part of the ship that could possibly be called spacious; the forward-telescopes housing demanded space. And then there were the observation bulges—the opportunity to see something of the natural universe, even if it was only the frozen flare of the stars drifting towards them.

He checked his figures again. Landfall in three days. Type 3b4 system; seven planets—one probable, one possible. There was nothing he could do at the moment except wait for the next spectroscopy report. He relaxed, and became aware of conversation from the nearest group of loungers. Someone

had asked someone yet again why he had volunteered for the Exploration.

"Hell, the way I look at it, it's the only real chance for promotion. It's all right if you graduate with one of those top honor grades, see. It's okay then. You move in on a nice easy Mars or Jupiter run, and promotion comes automatic. But I only got a Pass; I near as damn it flunked my math. So I take the Trip. Three years and I'm back as a certified Captain. And the future is very, very bright."

One of those with the speaker, a tall Supply Lieutenant, laughed.

"With me, the ladies. A neat blonde and a very neat brunette, to be precise. I could not love them, dears, so much, loved I not getting the hell away from them more. When I get back maybe I'll look up their great grandchildren, fifteen times removed."

The spectroscopy report came in, and Don checked it mechanically. Hearing things like that, he was never sure what kind of a fool he was. A fool for believing that they really meant what they said—that men could give up family, friends, six hundred years of history, for such trivial and ridiculous reasons?

Or, if they were sincere, a fool for his own misguided idealism? He knew very well why he had volunteered for the Trip. It was the idea of the human mission; spreading the power and wisdom of Man

through the shrinking universe. For that he had cut himself off from his own generation, from all that tangled web of human affection and inter-relationship.

And why was he disillusioned? There was nothing he could put a finger on, no more than a vague uneasiness. Everything had been as was to have been expected in the four successful landfalls they had so far made. In each case a struggling isolated culture had been given the tools—printing, electricity, atomic power—that would lift them in turn to the stars. It was all ideal and disinterested. There was nothing wrong with it.

"I hope," one of the group said emphatically, "that in the next joint the local hōoch is somewhat better than it was last time."

The possible turned out a flop—an arid, frozen, planet-wide dust-bowl—but they made a good landfall on the probable. He was picked as one of the interpreters this time, and had the language pumped into him under hypnosis. On this planet, strangely enough, there was only one language. Lawrence, the G-2 Director, puzzled over the matter at a briefing.

"It's a planetary culture, all right. The whole thing assimilated—there's not a trace of contributing ancestral groups. And it *smells* ancient. And yet technologically they're primitive. Windmills and

water-wheels, and animals for draught and transport! Their towns and cities—That's a nice white stone they use, but every block is hand hewn. There's something wrong about it. Whatever it is we've got to ferret it out."

Don stood with the half-dozen other interpreters on the thick pile carpet that covered the whole of G-2 HQ. Lawrence looked them over intently: "It's up to you to ferret it out," he said.

It was great to stand on crumbling earth again, and to breathe air uncontaminated by the staleness of artificiality. This atmosphere was a little high in oxygen, but that only increased the feeling of freshness. The great silvered body of the *Pericles* lay where it had come to rest, across the brow of the small, wooded hill. There was another hill perhaps three miles away, and the city stretched between them. He walked down towards it, luxuriating in freedom. Ordinary crew members were given rotas of leave to spend on visited planets, but leave hedged round by a thousand regulations and restrictions. As an interpreter his only duty was to examine the natives, and report.

He considered, as he walked down towards the city, the things that Lawrence had found puzzling. By all the more obvious signs the population was at the stage of secondary husbandry; agricultural,

eking out its own resources of labor with animals and primitive mechanical devices. But the preliminary reports had shown some peculiar gaps. No apparent recorded history and, possibly linked to this, no trace of arts.

The city before him corroborated this. The buildings were strictly functional; not untastefully so, but barren of any kind of ornateness or decoration. On its outskirts began the evenly spaced farmhouses which dotted the wide western plain to the distant horizon. They too were functional. There was one quite close to the dirt-track down which he was walking. One of the natives was forking some kind of crop into a heap in the yard. There were two young ones playing nearby. None of them paid any attention to him, although his silver and black uniform must contrast vividly with their own loose, colorful clothing. That was another queer thing.

He gave a personal report to Lawrence three days later.

"They're so damned *incursions*, sir. They are polite and deferential and friendly enough, but the fact that we have come across five hundred light years of space neither surprises nor interests them. It's not that they disbelieve it, or can't understand it. At least I don't think it's that. It's so hard to get at what they do think."

Lawrence nodded. "They've given

you some sort of a guide, I understand?"

"Yes. He calls himself Nuker. He's very friendly, too; and he answers all my questions without any hesitation. He's taken me all over the city."

"And you've found . . .?"

Don shrugged. "There's very little in it. Only three buildings of any size—the Council House, the Hospital, and the Museum. And they're only bigger boxes than the ordinary houses."

"The Hospital," Lawrence said. "Much disease?"

"Practically none. The usual crop of accidents you'd expect, though."

"And Museum?"

"That's what they call it," Don said doubtfully. "But it's no more than gallery after gallery of racks of discarded implements—kinds of spades, forks, scythes, and so on."

"An historical review of them?"

"No, that's just it. I went through half a dozen galleries, but they were all the same. Nuker tells me there hasn't been any change in them as long as people can remember."

"Then why the display?"

"According to him, it's not a display, though plenty of the people come to look at it, every day. It's just that when a worker dies, Nuker said, his tools are put there. I don't get it."

"No," Lawrence said. "We don't get it, but it would be queer if we did. An abnormality like that is

about the first really normal thing that's been reported on this planet. It doesn't satisfy me, but why should it? Anything further on technology?"

"Not a thing. What about the other interpreters?"

Lawrence flicked a small pile of papers with his finger. He said wearily: "The reports tally. All right, Parker. You'll have another two days, but I don't expect anything more substantial than this. Then you've been chosen for a little job."

"Sir?"

"The ceremonial handing over of scientific books in their own language. With a culture as well-knit as this we can give them the works—right up to atomic energy. You'd better have it laid on in the Council House."

He found himself getting more and more fond of Nuker. As with all planets approximately of earth type, the dominant race was anthropoid. Nuker's people were on the whole shorter and stockier than men, they were olive-skinned and hairless, but otherwise not unusual. At first, understandably, they had all looked alike. Now, after four days, he was beginning to appreciate the differences among them. Temperamentally these were far more extensive than one would have guessed from the stable, hard-working and inartistic life they all

led. He was brooding on this minor paradox as they crossed the main square together. On the opposite corner stood the Museum, facing the Council House. As usual there was a steady stream of natives going in and out of it. He stopped walking abruptly, and looked at them.

Two streams, one entering, one coming away. And there was a difference between them. It was a subtle difference, and since one did not look for subtlety in these stolid, farming natives, it was not surprising that he had not observed it before. But now that he was aware, the difference was real enough. The natives coming out of the museum were transfigured by a strange kind of contentment. In the faces of those going in, on the other hand, there was expectancy.

He turned and saw that Nuker was watching him.

"I'd like to go back in there, Nuker," he said.

Nuker nodded silently.

It seemed that he must have been mistaken. Inside the natives moved in a slow, incurious stream before the banked wooden shelves, piled up with worn and battered tools. Nuker led him along with the stream, pausing occasionally to tell him precisely how some particular implement was used. Gallery succeeded gallery, without apparent change. They were long, curving

galleries, and light came into them from windows too high to provide a view of the world outside. The mass shuffled forward, and Don and Nuker shuffled with them. There was something, Don felt, that was vaguely wrong, but he couldn't find what it was. At intervals the gallery debouched into stairs leading up to the next floor, where there was another curving, crowded gallery with another array of discarded tools.

There was nothing unusual here. It was a waste of time.

And then he saw it.

A kind of spade, reproduced a thousand times on the shelves. But on one he had noticed, idly, without interest, a particular chip on the handle, shaped like a horseshoe. And it was here again, the identical chip on the identical spade. He had passed this spot before.

At the same time he realized what was so subtly wrong about the gallery. It sloped—very gently, well nigh imperceptibly, effectively masked by the curving construction, but a definite downward slope. The pieces fell into pattern. Up the stairs, down the gentle slope curving right round the building, up the stairs . . . Quite an ingenious trick. But *why?* Why should the stolid farmers plan and perpetrate such a trick? The thought came home to him. Whatever they were, they were not just stolid farmers.

They reached the stairs again,

and climbed them. At the top there was the gallery entrance, and Nuker moved towards it. Gently, firmly, Don resisted the pressure. Instead, he followed the other stream going straight on up the stairs. Nuker followed him. On the next floor Nuker made another attempt to shepherd him into a gallery, and again he resisted. As he continued up the stairs, Nuker said simply: "It must happen."

It was clear that this was the very top of the building; there was no possibility of going up higher. The stairs swept round into the entrance to another gallery, but one which, in contrast to those on the lower floors, shimmered with a hundred tints of color from carpets and paintings and jeweled mosaic. The whole thing was fantastic. Don noticed that the stream of natives moved more slowly, with a thoughtful and abstracted purposefulness. They moved along the luxuriance of the gallery—the floor, he noted, was a veined blue stone, something like lapis lazuli—and round a curve, and it was before him.

It wasn't possible to look directly at it; the eyes were hurt and repelled. But from the corner of his gaze he could see something of its general shape. The high, wide golden arch came first—the machine was beyond it. If it were a machine. It seemed to be made entirely of crystal and was in continual, flickering motion, forming what looked like

mechanical vortices and whirlpools. He could almost see through it, to something lying beyond. Almost, but not quite.

The stream of natives went forward, through the great arch, and there his eyes lost them. It was as though they became merged with the spinning machine. Nuker's hand was on his arm.

Nuker said: "You must come now."

He nodded, surprised that he felt no fear. They walked forward together through the golden archway.

He often thought about it afterwards, seeking, for his own peace of mind, to remember and clarify the whole experience. But it was very difficult. They had gone through the archway, and in front of them the shivering, twisting mass of crystal had been so intensely overpowering that he had had to close his eyes. Then had come the vibration, the feeling of falling free, and his own cry of bewilderment and shock, answered by Nuker's friendly pressure on his arm.

He had opened his eyes, and he was in a different place.

It was not just a geographical difference. There was a difference in kind. Nothing here was still; everything was in vibrant, tilting motion, from the iridescent sky—if it were sky—overhead, to the ground, studded with brilliant, flickering flowers and gigantic, pulsat-

ing crystals, beneath his feet. For that matter, his feet—his body—his entire self—were changed. He was transformed into a creature of lightness and strength. He looked beside him for Nuker, and found him similarly transfigured. Nuker smiled, and touched his arm, and at the touch both of them floated up into the light and boisterous air.

After that he could remember nothing but impressions. Impressions of the great floating concourses swaying together in mass dances whose patterns and rhythms were tantalizingly near to his understanding. Impressions of the great floods of music, apparently answered by the air, the ground, by everything, until singers, song and the entire universe throbbed together in melody. Impressions of emotions, almost tangible in their impact; love and truth and knowledge, and an abiding friendliness. Time meant nothing. He did not know how long he had been there when Nuker led him through another gateway, and he found himself back in the gallery, shuffling forward towards the stairs that led downwards.

He said to Nuker: "Well?"

"We are a very old race," Nuker said. "We don't know how old. Once we kept histories. In those days we built many great machines; we traveled across oceans and continents and, as you now do, across the spaces between worlds. But

there was no contentment for us in it. The machines did our bidding and by their aid we traveled more and more swiftly and frantically from land to land, finding no abiding peace. Then The Machine was discovered. I cannot explain its principles to you, nor the meaning of the world beyond the gateway. There is no way of making you understand what it is and how it works."

"But why hide it? Why all this deception? The museum hasn't just been built for our benefit—I mean, me and my friends. Obviously, it was long planned . . ."

"Of course," Nuker said. "In the far distant past we, too, traveled between the worlds, as I have told you. Perhaps even to your planet. We gave such things as fire and the wheel to many worlds in their infancy. So we knew that we would be visited in our turn. Once we had discovered the meaning of The Machine it was clear that, in all our cities, it must be so housed that visitors from other worlds would not be likely to find it. That isn't easy."

"And now," Don said, "it has been found."

Nuker looked at him. "Are you going to report on this?"

"It's my duty to do so."

Nuker said softly. "Do you realize what that will mean? Since you landed here we have surveyed your people; perhaps more thoroughly

than you have surveyed us. You are far more sensitive than the majority—and even so the world beyond the gateway was flawed by your presence today. You could not be aware of it, but it was so. Should your people learn the secret we do not know what would happen. You must know that the higher is always, in many ways, at the mercy of the lower, as life is at the mercy of lifeless matter."

Don said: "So you want me to cut my people off from the gateway? To refuse them the chance of that experience?"

Nuker said: "In honesty . . . what do you feel?"

He thought of the world beyond the golden arch, of the wild, unearthly music, the great aerial sweep of the dances. Dimly he recognized that beyond the gateway the world itself was alive and conscious. He thought of the crew of the *Pericles*. 'Hell, the way I look at it, it's the only real chance for promotion . . . ' 'With me, the ladies. When I get back . . . ' 'I hope that in the next joint the hooch is better . . . ' The two things could not live together; and he knew as surely as Nuker did which would crumple and fail.

"You win," he said. "I shall make no report."

Nuker smiled, a smile of relief and joy and the friendliness that flooded the world beyond the golden arch. And Don realized that he

was cutting off himself, too, from those joys, those wonders.

He said: "If I could persuade them to let me stay here . . ."

Nuker said, regretfully, "Even if you could do that without arousing suspicion—and you couldn't, you know—it is true what I said about the flaw. You would become aware of it yourself, and you would not be happy here long."

He said nothing further until Nuker led the way outside into the city square. Then:

"But why do you work in the fields—ordinary, menial work? The machines could do all that for you."

Nuker said: "That is what I meant. You cannot understand our life. You must leave it at that; you can do nothing else."

The ceremony was quite impressive. In the square in front of the Council House he handed over the books and models that had been specially prepared. Nuker as solemnly accepted them. Quite a number of the natives watched in polite and friendly disinterest. Later he stood with Lawrence, watching the planet shrink away from the G-2 observation panels as the *Pericles* lifted in power and majesty through the atmosphere towards the next objective in the Exploration.

Lawrence shook his head.

"There was something wrong there. I wish I knew what. I'd like to know what they do with the

knowledge we've given them, too. Nothing, I'll bet. It's a pity the Trip doesn't allow for return visits. To my mind they're stuck in some kind of premature decadence. I don't know if they could be shifted, but I'd like trying."

Don was watching the outline of land beneath the ship coalesce into misty formlessness. He had an aching feeling of loss, and a suspicion that it would be with him the rest of his life. Some essential part of him remained down there, beyond the golden arch.

"If we could have had more *time* . . ." Lawrence said.

He could go back. This was his last opportunity. He could tell Lawrence now, and have the great vessel settle back, to root out the final secrets of Nuker's people. It almost seemed worth it. The world beyond the gateway might dissolve in agony, but first he would go back there.

Lawrence said: "Your reports were well presented. I'll use you again."

The ache was savage, but he saw it could be worse. He said: "Thank you, sir. Am I relieved?"

"Relieved, Parker."

The nav room, as usual, was crowded. "Did you ever try mixing that Martian bug juice with real alcohol?" someone was saying. "One time I had this little redhead with me, and . . ." * * *

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